



Hattie

Orlan Orphans, Book 13

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN
OSBOURNE

Hattie

Orlan Orphans Book 13

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10

Epilogue

About the Author

Also by Kirsten Osbourne

This book is for my cousin, Willy Hart. Thanks for being the inspirational man you are. There are videos of Willy roping one-armed on YouTube.

Hattie Sanders adjusted her bonnet, shifting nervously on the bench.

“I can’t wait to see the lasso throwers!” Katie squealed, perched next to Hattie in the large pavilion.

Hattie couldn’t wait, either. Her father, Cletus Sanders, had told the family that he had a surprise for them. Earlier that evening, he’d announced that he was taking his wife and three of his daughters—Hattie, Theresa, and Katie—to the Wild West show in Bagley.

Hattie had never been to a Wild West show, but she had read about them in the newspaper. Cletus had told her that this evening’s show would include men and women who had traveled from all over the nation to compete and perform.

Orphaned at an early age, Hattie had lived in an orphanage in Orlan, New York for as far back as she could remember. A few years ago, when the church running the orphanage had decided boys and girls should not live in the same facility, Hattie and fourteen other orphans had traveled by bus to Nowhere, Texas.

When the plans for their housing had fallen through at the last minute, an eccentric, wealthy older couple had adopted all fifteen young women and taken them into their elegant home.

Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders were both characters, but Hattie had grown extremely fond of them over the years. She felt lucky to have been adopted into such a warm and loving home. It was true that Edna Petunia had a few peculiar qualities, but her heart was in the right place, and she would do anything for one of her beloved ‘bastards’—her term of endearment for the orphans.

Now, most of Hattie’s sisters had moved out of the Sanders’ residence, marrying and starting families of their own. Only the three youngest girls remained—Hattie, Theresa, and Katie. Hattie wasn’t sure what the future had in store for her. Although she knew her married sisters were happy, she had never fallen for a man before. Unlike Katie, the youngest daughter, she wasn’t likely to swoon over the first handsome man who attended church services in Nowhere. A husband and children sounded nice enough, but Hattie wasn’t sure if it was right for her. Maybe she would end up alone.

After all, Edna Petunia had been alone for most of her adult life. As a young woman, she had been bereaved when her strapping sweetheart died suddenly and unexpectedly just before their wedding. Despite her broken heart, the spirited woman had lived a full and rich life, traveling all the way to Nowhere from Seattle with her good friend, Dr. Iris Harvey. In Nowhere, she'd fallen for a mysterious older man in the woods, and they'd married quickly.

Shortly after their marriage, Edna Petunia had learned that although Cletus lived humbly, he wasn't from humble means—he owned a large, beautiful home in Nowhere. Since Edna Petunia was well past child-bearing age, she was disappointed that they wouldn't have the opportunity to fill their bedrooms with the sounds of little feet, but she and Cletus had enjoyed a happy life together.

Still, when they had heard about the orphaned girls with no place to go, they had known it was a sign from above that their prayers for a family had been answered. They had taken in all of the girls with arms wide open, and now their family was constantly growing. One of Hattie's sisters, Penny, had married a man named Tom who was the seventh son of a seventh son. Now, Penny and Tom were working on having seven sons of their own, but in addition to those boys, they had also adopted several orphans who helped out on their sprawling ranch outside of Bagley.

Some of Hattie's sisters had married men who already had children, and others, like her sister Sarah Jane, had adopted children whose parents had died. Hattie enjoyed seeing her nieces and nephews, and sometimes she wondered if she'd ever have the chance to be a mother.

As she waited for the show to start, she wondered if any of her sisters or their families were in the audience. She had a feeling that a few of her nieces and nephews would get a real kick out of seeing some of the events.

Suddenly, the crowd quieted, and a man in a large cowboy hat took a spot in the center of the grassy area that would serve as the arena. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Wild West! In just a few minutes, you'll see an act unlike anything you've ever seen before!" the man shouted.

Thunderous applause rang through the pavilion. Several horses rushed into the center ring, men mounted on their backs.

Katie nudged Hattie. "Oh, they're so handsome, don't you think?"

Hattie smiled. "You need to pay attention or you'll miss the show!"

"Quiet, please! I'm trying to concentrate!" Theresa put in.

"They're just warming up. The real show will start in a little bit," Cletus explained. He loved it when he could provide new experiences for his daughters. They'd had a rough upbringing, but now that they

lived with the Sanders family, Cletus's aim was to make sure they had everything they could possibly want. Within reason, of course—he wasn't about to spoil his daughters.

Edna Petunia laughed at her daughters and grabbed her hip flask. She unscrewed the cap and tilted her head back, pouring some liquid into her mouth. She smiled and sighed when she was finished.

Edna Petunia always told her family that the flask was filled with cough medicine, although some people had their suspicions that the liquid was of a different variety. Hattie couldn't begrudge Edna Petunia, though. She and Cletus had done everything for their daughters, from providing them a safe and stable home to feeding them delicious meals to making sure they received a good education.

Cletus watched his wife take another satisfying gulp. "Now you've gone and made me thirsty!" he complained. "Hattie, would you be a dear and fetch me some of that lemonade I saw on our way in?"

Hattie nodded. Cletus handed her a nickel.

"I want some, too!" Katie chimed in.

"What about you, Theresa and Edna Petunia?" Hattie asked.

Edna Petunia grinned. "No, thank you. I'm not thirsty."

Theresa shook her head. "I don't like lemonade."

"I'll be right back," Hattie told her family.

"Hurry, Hattie! You don't want to miss the show!" Katie called as Hattie walked toward the entrance to the pavilion.

Hattie wondered what type of events the pavilion usually held. She had never been to the Bagley fairgrounds before, and she was overwhelmed by the number of people and sounds that surrounded her. A woman in a large hat nearly knocked Hattie over as she barreled past.

Hattie took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She tried to remember where they had seen the lemonade stand on their way into the pavilion. She couldn't recall whether she should take a right or a left. There seemed to be more people to the right, so she turned left.

As she walked, Hattie was sure she had made a wrong turn. She didn't see anything that looked familiar. She decided to keep going a little farther, just in case. If she didn't see the lemonade stand, she would turn around and retrace her steps.

Hattie passed by a series of tents she hadn't noticed before. Excited voices were speaking in high-pitched tones. Hattie paused, trying to make out what they were saying.

"Hurry on up!"

"We're going to be late!"

"You had better not—"

"That's the last time—"

Hattie was so preoccupied that she didn't notice the tall stranger

until he was practically on top of her. "Oh!" Hattie exclaimed, startled.

A hand helped steady her. "What are you doing back here, little lady?" an amused voice asked.

Hattie looked up into good-natured eyes and the most handsome face she'd ever seen. His shoulders were broad, and he wore a white shirt and a broad hat. Something seemed a little strange with his appearance, but Hattie couldn't figure out what it was. She sucked in a deep breath.

The man stared at her, fighting back a laugh. "This here's Wild West country, do you understand?"

Hattie shook her head truthfully. "No, I don't, sir. What does that mean?"

The man let out a big, rumbling laugh. "My, you're a polite one. Jessie! We've got ourselves a runaway!"

To Hattie's surprise, a plump woman in a gray dress came out of one of the tents. "Oh, no. A nice girl like you—no, no, the rodeo's no life for you!"

Hattie blushed. She could tell she was out of place. "Oh, no, I was just looking for—"

"I'm just teasing you, darling. Anyone ever tell you you're mighty pretty when you blush?" The man stared at Hattie straight on, and Hattie felt a fluttering sensation below her stomach. Her knees buckled a bit, and she had to fight to keep from falling over.

"Excuse me?" Hattie managed to say. *Lemonade*, she reminded herself. She was supposed to be finding lemonade for Cletus. She hoped she wasn't missing the show.

"This here's the section where all of the no-good, scheming, hare-brained rodeo cowboys stay. A nice girl such as yourself has no business being back here. The entrance is that way," the man explained, pointing in the direction Hattie had come from.

Hattie swallowed. "Thank you, sir."

"Will!" The woman swatted the man on the arm. "Stop teasing this poor girl! You've got more important things to do. Hurry along."

"Only having fun, Jessie. What good would life be without a little fun?" Will ran a hand through his hair and winked mischievously at Hattie. Hattie stared at the ground, feeling flustered.

"Do you need help, dear?" the woman asked kindly.

Hattie shook her head. "Well, I was looking for—"

"My lemonade! Goodness, Hattie, what are you doing?" Cletus's voice cut through the hum of the crowd.

"I got a little lost." Hattie shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Will tipped his hat and flashed a wide grin at Hattie. His teeth were white and even, and his whole face lit up when he smiled. "You

might be the best part of this sleepy little town. I hope to see more of you, darling.”

Cletus stepped between Will and Hattie, hands on his hips. “You certainly will not! My daughter’s a good girl.”

Hattie wished she could sink into the ground. Will made her heart beat faster. She wished she could listen to him talk for a while longer. But Cletus had insulted him and embarrassed her.

Will took it in stride, simply winking at Hattie again and spinning around. As he walked away, Hattie realized what she had thought was odd about his appearance. Hanging out of his right shirt sleeve, where his arm should have been, was a silver hook. Hattie watched as he jauntily walked away, puzzled and intrigued.

Jessie looked grumpy with Will gone. “You shouldn’t be here. Go to your seats, you’ll miss the show!” she grumbled as she returned to her tent.

Cletus put his hand on Hattie’s shoulders and guided her back in the direction she had come from. “I thought maybe you could use a little help carrying all those cups of lemonade. But I didn’t see you by the stand, so I knew you’d gotten lost. Hattie, you must listen to me carefully—this is a dangerous area. You are not to speak to strangers like that. People around here aren’t trustworthy.”

“Yes, Cletus,” Hattie said.

“Good. I’m glad that’s understood. Now, let’s see about that lemonade before our tickets go to waste!” Cletus grinned and led the way toward the lemonade stand.

When they got to the stand, Hattie paid for three cups of lemonade with the nickel. The woman working at the stand gave her change, and Hattie gave it back to Cletus, who slipped it into his pocket.

Cletus and Hattie carried the lemonade back into the pavilion and made their way back to their seats.

“They’re starting soon!” Katie whispered excitedly.

Hattie sat down and took a sip of her lemonade. It was cold as ice and tart, and she enjoyed the cool sensation as she drank. She pressed the cup to her forehead, feeling the heat of the summer day.

The pavilion quieted once more as the announcer in the cowboy hat took center stage again. The men on horses had disappeared, and the announcer was the only person in the arena. “Ladies and gentlemen—I give you, America’s finest showmen!”

Suddenly, dozens of men on horses began to gallop back into the arena one by one. They formed a chain and raced in a circle, with each horse covered by a shiny saddle and brightly colored cloths. Hattie was dazed at the beautiful display before her. She and her sisters stared, mesmerized, as each man and horse pair performed tricks for the audience.

One man dismounted and stood in front of his horse. The horse stole his hat, and the audience broke out into thunderous laughter. One man stood on his horse's back as the horse raced around in a circle. A dozen bulls ran into the arena, and Hattie gripped the sides of her seat, scared. But one of the men simply broke out from the pack and chased after them, roping all of them in under a minute.

As Hattie and the rest of the audience cheered, she realized that the man who had roped all of the steer looked familiar. As he took a bow, she saw the hook protruding from the sleeve of his shirt. It was Will, the man she'd met outside the pavilion!

Hattie's heart skipped a beat as she watched the man expertly handle the crowd. He threw kisses and bowed again. Then, all of the men led their horses outside of the arena, and the announcer came back.

The rest of the show flew by for Hattie. There were sharpshooting events, hunting, and racing. It seemed like every time Will came out, he was one of the best or the best man in the arena. The crowd loved him, cheering wildly each time he appeared.

"He's very good-looking," Katie confided to Hattie.

Hattie glanced at Cletus. She wanted to tell Katie that she'd met the man, but she didn't want to upset Cletus. She decided she would tell her sister later about their strange meeting.

Theresa nodded. "He is good-looking. I wonder what happened to his arm."

Hattie realized that she hadn't even thought about how much harder it must be for Will than the other men to ride horses, rope cattle, and shoot. They all had two arms, two hands, and everything that came with it. He was operating with only one hand and one arm. The hook might have helped a little, but he should have been at a serious disadvantage.

Hattie was amazed as she watched the show continue. She wasn't sure why Cletus had expressed such a strong dislike for Will. She was glad that she had at least gotten the chance to meet him even though their encounter was brief. She sighed. Of course, the first man she had ever been attracted to would happen to be a member of a traveling rodeo company.

That evening, Hattie and Katie stayed up far later than the others. Although there were plenty of rooms in the house and each orphan could have easily had her own room, Katie didn't like to sleep alone, so she had decided to stay in Hattie's room that evening. Both of them had been so excited by the Wild West Show that they weren't able to sleep.

"I loved the rodeo so much." Katie sighed dreamily.

Hattie nodded in the dark room. "It was so amazing."

"And the men were something else!" Katie added. "I wouldn't mind being courted by any one of them."

Hattie giggled. "I know what you mean." She paused. "Actually, I have a secret."

"What's that?" Katie exclaimed. She loved secrets.

"I met one of the men in the show." Hattie smiled as she heard Katie gasp.

"How? When? Which one?" Katie's yelps rang out across the room.

"Sh!" Hattie hissed. "Edna Petunia and Cletus will wake up. Or Theresa!"

Katie quieted. "Please tell me, Hattie. Please?"

"Of course." Hattie laughed. "When I went to get the lemonade, I got lost at first. I took a wrong turn, and I ended up in front of all these tents. It almost seemed like people were living in the tents. But then, this big, handsome man came up to me."

"Tell me what he looked like!" Katie demanded.

"You may have noticed him during the show," Hattie explained. "He's tall and broad-shouldered, and he only has one arm. He uses a hook on his right side."

"Oh, Hattie, I know exactly who you're talking about!" Katie gushed. "He really was handsome!"

"Yes, and he was teasing me. He kept trying to say that I was a runaway or something. He talked to another woman from the tents, but I was so nervous I could barely say a word. He probably thinks I'm very dull!" Hattie worried out loud.

"He was teasing you?" Katie smiled. "I think that's a good sign, Hattie. It means he likes you."

"I don't know about that. He just seemed friendly." Hattie secretly hoped her sister was right.

"Well, what else did you learn about him?" Katie prodded. "He was so good!"

"He really was. We didn't get to talk for very long, but I heard the woman call him Will. So that must be his name," Hattie explained.

"Will. What a lovely name," Katie said dreamily.

"But after only a few minutes, Cletus came looking for me. He stopped the conversation and told me I was never to speak to Will or anyone like him ever again!" Hattie told Katie. "He said that men like him are not to be trusted."

"Oh, no, that's terrible! Why would Cletus not like him?" Katie wondered.

"I don't know. He said that it was a bad area." Hattie wasn't sure why Cletus had had such a strong reaction to Will.

Katie thought for a moment. "I'm sure if Cletus got to know him, he wouldn't dislike him."

"You're probably right," Hattie agreed. "But it doesn't matter because soon the rodeo will move on to the next town, and we'll never see any of them ever again."

Katie sighed dramatically. "That's awfully sad."

"I know." Hattie closed her eyes. "I wish he didn't have to leave."

Katie nodded. "I wish I could see that show again. So much was happening, I could hardly pay attention."

"I wonder how much longer they'll be in town . . ." Hattie trailed off, an idea forming in her mind.

"I think Cletus said they'd be here for two weeks," Katie replied.

"And I wonder how much tickets are," Hattie continued.

Katie's mouth dropped open. "Hattie, are you thinking up a plan over there?"

Hattie smiled. "It's only a thought. But if you're interested . . ."

"Tell me more." Katie tried to suppress her giggles but failed.

In the dark, Hattie whispered her idea to Katie, and both girls fell asleep, laughing and dreaming of leaping horses and rodeo cowboys.

IN THE MORNING, Hattie was stern. "Not a word of this to Edna Petunia or Cletus."

Katie nodded. "Yes, ma'am!"

Hattie chuckled. With a little luck, her plan would work out just fine.

While they lived in the Sanders' house, each orphan was responsible for either working or attending school. Since Hattie had

finished her schooling, she helped out around the house three days per week and worked at the mercantile two days per week, helping her sister Ruby and Ruby's husband, Lewis, clean up around the shop.

It was one of her days to work at home, not at the mercantile, but Hattie needed to make a trip there in order for her plan to work. She skipped breakfast and did the washing. When she was done, she hung the clean clothes up to dry on a piece of twine strung between two trees.

After she had finished, she went back into the house and kissed Edna Petunia on the cheek. "I need to go to the mercantile. I left one of my books there, and I'd like to read it." Hattie was only stretching the truth, not lying. She really had left a book at the mercantile.

But there was another reason she wanted to go into town.

Fortunately, Edna Petunia didn't question her. "All right, dear."

Hattie looked at Katie meaningfully before she left the house. She knew Katie could keep a secret—most of the time. She was counting on her not to breathe a word of their plan to their parents. Edna Petunia and Cletus surely would not approve. Katie smiled at Hattie and motioned that her lips were sealed.

Hattie left the house and set off for town. It was a dry summer day in Nowhere, and the sun was shining. She marveled at how beautiful her town was. She was very glad that of all the places the church could have sent her and her sisters, they'd chosen to send them to Texas.

By the time she got to the mercantile, Lewis was opening the store for the day. He changed the sign from CLOSED to OPEN so the citizens of Nowhere would know that they could visit the mercantile and do their shopping for the week.

"Hattie! I wasn't expecting to see you today." Lewis held the door open so Hattie could enter the store.

"I know I'm not working today, but I figured I'd stop by and see if you needed any help," Hattie began. "Also, while I'm here, I wonder if you have any extra tickets for the rodeo?"

Lewis's face brightened. "That's kind of you. And yes, Cletus was in here just a few days ago purchasing tickets. The Wild West Show sounds like a great deal of fun."

Hattie took a deep breath. "I'd like to purchase two more." She hoped Lewis wouldn't question her motives.

Lewis wore a puzzled expression. "Aren't you going to go with Cletus?"

Hattie nodded quickly. "He took the three of us last night, and Edna Petunia of course. It was wonderful, so wonderful I want to see it again!"

"Oh, I see." Lewis stroked his chin. "Well, I have a few extra

tickets. Admission is a nickel per person.”

Hattie pulled out the small coin purse she carried in her pocket and dug for change. She handed two nickels to Lewis.

Lewis went to the register and took two paper tickets out of a small stack. He held them out to Hattie.

As Hattie reached for them, Lewis held them back. “I assume Edna Petunia and Cletus know that you’re going again, right?”

Hattie’s heart raced, and her hands felt clammy. She hadn’t officially asked Edna Petunia or Cletus about seeing the show again. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I know they can sometimes be strict with you girls who still live at home,” Lewis explained. “I don’t want to get on their bad side.”

Hattie nodded. “I understand. It won’t be a problem.”

Lewis hesitated for a moment. Finally, he held the tickets out to her again.

Hattie snatched them quickly. “Thank you, Lewis!” She began to rush out the door. Before she could exit the mercantile, she remembered her earlier promise. She paused and turned back to face Lewis. “Did you need any help straightening up today?”

Lewis looked around the mercantile and chuckled. “Thanks for checking, Hattie. But I think we’re all right for now. Go on and enjoy yourselves at the Wild West Show tonight!”

Hattie thanked Lewis and hurried home. The entire way back, she daydreamed about handsome Will and his impressive tricks. She couldn’t wait for the chance to see him again. She couldn’t believe how lucky she was.

Once safely back in the Sanders’ house, her daily chores seemed to drag on for ages. It was her turn to mop the kitchen and parlor floors, and Hattie spent hours on her hands and knees, scrubbing and thinking about Will’s riding and maneuvering.

After a brief lunch of pork and beans, Hattie returned to her chores. She was responsible for dusting the entirety of the house, and she knew the task may take her until the end of the day. By her estimate, as long as she and Katie departed just after dinner, they would arrive at the rodeo show just in time to see all of the featured acts.

Katie was busy elsewhere with chores of her own, but she kept finding reasons to sneak into whatever room Hattie happened to be dusting. “I’m so excited!”

Hattie glared at her to remind Katie to be quiet. “I am, too, but if you talk too loud, they’ll find out and they’ll never let us go!”

Katie simply smiled and skipped away.

Hattie couldn’t blame Katie—both of them were excited about their second trip to the Wild West.

Finally, it was time for dinner. Since it was Katie's turn to help prepare and serve the meal, she took extra care and attention into what Cletus got on his plate. They hoped to distract him so he wouldn't object to their leaving the house after dinner, which was an unusual occurrence.

Hattie waited until the perfect moment in the meal before she said anything. Cletus was gnawing on a large fried chicken wing, Edna Petunia was snoring after having fallen asleep at the table, and Theresa and Katie were watching their parents, amused. Hattie took a deep breath. "Katie and I are going to Ruby's house this evening to watch the baby."

At first, no one said anything. Hattie began to breathe a little more fully, but then Cletus stopped mid-bite. "What's that?"

Katie looked down at her plate. She had stopped eating.

Hattie met Cletus's gaze. "Ruby asked us to help watch the baby this evening. She's doing something for the mercantile. A big order or something."

Cletus frowned. "Isn't it awfully late?"

"It's a little late," Hattie admitted. "But Katie and I are both able to take care of ourselves."

Cletus sighed loudly. "Take the wagon."

Hattie thought she hadn't heard him correctly. "Excuse me?"

"Take the wagon. You know how to drive it, don't you?" Cletus continued as if it were a normal occurrence to offer one of his daughters the ability to drive the family wagon.

Hattie smiled gratefully. "Yes, I do. Oh, thank you, Cletus!" Hattie couldn't help herself. She stood up and walked over to Cletus, throwing her arms around him.

Cletus shook his head in amusement. "Don't get used to it. I don't want you girls to think I've gone soft in my old age."

After dinner, Hattie and Katie quickly did the dishes and put them away, then went outside to the wagon. It was still light out, thankfully, and Hattie prepared for their journey the same way Cletus had taught her to.

She stroked the lead horse's hair and patted her on the rump. "Ready, girl?" After both girls had climbed into the wagon, Hattie took the reins into her hands and flicked them. The horses took off at a quick trot, and Hattie steered them toward the Bagley fairgrounds.

As they raced toward the rodeo, Hattie's heart pounded. She had never snuck away from her house before, and she felt guilty that she had involved Katie in her scheme, too. She hated lying or being untruthful to her parents, and she wished she could immediately return to the Sanders' home and be honest with her parents.

But every time she felt guilty, she would remember Will's face and

his kind, soulful eyes. She wanted to stare into those eyes for hours on end, to learn what made him tick, to take his hand into hers and hold it for the longest time.

Surely there was a reason that she had met Will the previous night. It was almost like fate had brought them together.

“What are you thinking about?” Katie’s voice rattled as they trotted over the bumpy ground.

“Will,” Hattie admitted. She wondered what his full name was and where he had grown up. He seemed so tall and mysterious.

“I still can’t believe you got to meet him!” Katie squealed.

“I can’t believe it either,” Hattie confessed.

The girls made it to the fairgrounds quickly, and Hattie tied the horses to a post after parking the wagon. She felt a twinge of guilt when she thought of Edna Petunia and Cletus sitting at home, thinking they were both at Ruby’s house, but she ignored it and moved toward the entrance.

A fast-talking man took their tickets and pointed them toward the pavilion. “Pick your seats!”

Katie began walking toward the seats, but Hattie grabbed her hand and pulled her back. “Follow me,” Hattie whispered.

Katie was surprised, but she obeyed Hattie’s command.

Hattie led Katie through the gathering crowds toward the tents she had seen the day before. Sure enough, the area around them was full of boisterous laughter.

Hattie scanned the crowd for Will but couldn’t see him. She did recognize Jessie, the maternal woman she had met the day before along with Will.

“Why, there’s the pretty little girl again!” Jessie exclaimed as she rushed toward Hattie. “And you have a friend!”

“She’s my sister,” Hattie explained.

Jessie looked back and forth between the two girls but didn’t say anything.

Hattie couldn’t blame Jessie—she and Katie looked nothing alike. But she usually let people assume they were biological sisters. It was just easier that way.

“I was hoping—” Hattie began nervously, then stopped.

Katie watched her sister patiently. When Hattie didn’t speak up, Katie interjected. “We’re looking for Will. The man with one arm!”

Jessie’s eyes twinkled. “He’s getting ready for the show. I’ll tell him he had a few visitors, though.”

“No!” Hattie exclaimed. “Please, don’t tell him that.”

Jessie looked at Hattie, puzzled.

“I don’t want it to go to his head!” Hattie explained after a bit of thought. She was having a hard time explaining it, but she didn’t want

Will to know she had been asking after him.

“Whatever you say. Now, you two should hurry—you don’t want to miss the opening act!” Jessie cried.

Hattie and Katie wished Jessie a good evening and rushed to their seats. The audience quieted just as they sat down. Again, the announcer came to the center of the arena and welcomed the men on horses out to do their various tricks.

Tonight, though, Hattie noticed several things she hadn’t noticed earlier. For one, one of the men wasn’t a man at all—she was a woman on horseback! She could stand on her horse and even do a handstand on top of the saddle!

“How is she able to balance like that?” Katie whispered to Hattie.

Hattie shook her head, impressed beyond words.

When Will came out, Hattie’s breath caught in her throat. As he hung precariously to his horse, Hattie felt like she was connected with him in a special way. If Will got hurt or fell off his horse, Hattie knew she would feel pain, too. Fortunately, Will was incredibly steady and talented. Again, the crowd cheered more for him than any of the other performers.

That evening, there were also jugglers who threw colorful plates into the air and danced with bright scarves. Hattie enjoyed all of the performances but none as much as Will’s. He seemed to be able to communicate with his horse, jumping and dancing all over the arena, and he was expert in the shooting events despite the fact that he only had one hand and one hook to hold the gun with.

By the end of the show, Hattie couldn’t help it—Will had captured her imagination. As she and Katie left the arena with the other audience members, Katie caught Hattie looking around. “What are you looking at?”

Hattie’s cheeks flushed. “I was hoping to catch a glimpse of Will.”

Katie’s eyes glistened mischievously. “Let’s find him!”

Hattie frowned. “We need to get back home. Edna Petunia and Cletus will worry.”

“A few minutes won’t hurt.” Katie took off running in the direction of the tents Hattie had shown her earlier.

Hattie felt nervous, but she followed her sister into the crowd. Katie darted through the crowds skillfully, and Hattie had to rush to catch up, trying not to bump into anyone.

When they got to the tent area, several men, dancers, and the female rider they had seen in the show clustered around the structures.

People laughed and cheered, clapping each other on the back. Hattie felt nervous to be close to so many talented people, but Katie seemed right at home.

“Excuse me, we’re looking for Will. Is he here?” Katie said boldly.

Hattie blushed. Although she couldn’t believe how forward Katie was, she also loved that about her sister.

“You mean Will Hart?” a man asked.

“What do you want with Will?” a voice asked.

“He’ll only lead to trouble!” another man put in.

“Who’s asking about me?” Suddenly, Will himself appeared directly in front of Hattie, a confident smirk on his face. “Oh. It’s you!”

Hattie flushed with pleasure. She couldn’t believe he had remembered her. She thought he must be used to meeting all types of women on his tours. There was no way he thought she was something special. But it was nice just to be noticed.

The cowboy leaned down and whispered into her ear, sending chills up and down her spine. “I’m glad you couldn’t stay away from me.”

Hattie couldn’t breathe. She blinked her eyes, trying to calm herself, but it wasn’t working.

Fortunately, Katie stepped in. “How did you get to be so good at riding a horse? Especially with one arm?”

The crowd laughed and cleared some space around Katie, Hattie, and Will. There were other fans who wanted to speak to some of the other performers, and Hattie was grateful to have the extra space.

“I don’t mind telling you all about that on one condition,” Will said with a twinkle in his eye.

“What’s the condition?” Katie asked.

“That you tell me your name and your lovely friend’s name,” Will replied, not taking his eyes off Hattie’s face. Hattie felt like her cheeks were on fire, but she held her gaze steady.

Katie giggled. “Oh, that’s easy! I’m Katie Sanders, and this is my sister, Hattie. We live in Nowhere.”

“Pleased to meet you, Katie, Hattie.” Since Will’s right arm was missing, he used his left hand to shake with each girl. “I’m Will Hart.”

When their hands met, Hattie felt an instant connection with him. Her stomach felt like it was doing flips, and her heart raced. Her mind clouded so she could no longer focus on anything but the beautiful man standing in front of her.

Suddenly, Hattie realized that both Katie and Will were looking at her.

“Are you okay?” Katie frowned. “You’re just standing there.”

Hattie straightened up and took a few deep breaths. “Please excuse me.”

Hattie began to take a walk back toward the arena. Although the show had ended, several people still gathered, talking excitedly about

the show. Hattie had to admit, she could understand their enthusiasm. Even though she'd seen the show two nights in a row, she had a feeling that she could see it every night straight for weeks and never get bored.

Hattie fanned her face, hoping she didn't look as red as she felt. There was something about Will Hart that made her feel dangerous and exciting. She wanted to chase that feeling and to be with him all the time, but she knew that Cletus wouldn't approve of it.

For that matter, Cletus probably wouldn't approve of anything she had done that day. She searched the crowd for Katie, knowing they needed to get out of Bagley as soon as possible.

Hattie felt sick to her stomach knowing she had misled her parents. Finally, she caught sight of Katie's braids and rushed up to her. "We need to go!"

Katie smiled sweetly at Will Hart. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Will. I do hope we'll see you again before you leave us!"

Will tipped his hat to Hattie and winked at her. "Your sister's a doll, but I wish you had stuck around to talk to me a little more. I'd like to get to know you better."

Hattie gulped. She wanted that, too, but how could she explain that Cletus had forbidden it? Even Katie looked stumped.

"We need to go now. Have a good night!" Hattie spun around and grabbed Katie's elbow. The two girls rushed back to where the wagon was parked and prepared to drive back to the Sanders' house.

When they got back, Hattie's heart was still racing. Inside, Edna Petunia and Cletus were both sleeping. Hattie and Katie changed into their nightclothes and slipped under the covers in their beds, practically holding their breaths and waiting to be caught.

At some point, Hattie drifted off to sleep, visions of leaping horses, kind eyes, and cowboy hats galloping through her mind.

Although Hattie couldn't believe it, Edna Petunia and Cletus

didn't find out that they had sneaked out to see the Wild West Show instead of helping Ruby and Lewis. Hattie still felt a bit guilty about it, but she also felt incredibly happy that she had gotten to see Will Hart perform again, not to mention meet him!

"What are you thinking about? You've got that far-off, dreamy glint in your eye!" Edna Petunia said sternly when she caught Hattie staring out the window, neglecting her dishwashing duty.

"Nothing!" Hattie cried immediately. She liked that her relationship with Will was private—even though it was imaginary, she didn't have to share it with anyone. She wasn't ready to talk about her feelings with anyone, especially not her mother! Katie knew how she felt because she had seen Hattie and Will together, but aside from that, Hattie didn't plan to tell anyone.

"Get back to work, then!" Edna Petunia said crossly and continued on her inspection of the kitchen. Theresa, who was washing dishes, smiled up at Hattie.

On that day, it was Hattie's turn to retrieve the mail. She walked out to the mailbox, gathered the envelopes, and returned to the house. She set the stack of letters down on the kitchen table and began opening them.

To her surprise, there was one addressed to "Ms. Hattie Sanders."

Dear Hattie,

I was immediately taken by you at the fairgrounds not once, but twice! Lucky me. I am sending you one important question I would like you to answer. Hattie, please make me not only a lucky man, but the luckiest man in the world by agreeing to be my wife. I'll admit that the rodeo isn't always the most glamorous place for a woman, but there are many couples on the circuit who make it work. I want to make it work with you.

Sincerely,

Will Hart

Hattie dropped the letter onto the table with a yelp. Katie came running. "What is it, Hattie?"

Hattie shook her head. She wasn't sure she wanted to tell anyone about the letter. She wanted some time to think about what had

happened and how to respond. "I was startled for a moment, but now I'm fine."

"Hm. Okay." Katie eyed her suspiciously and left the kitchen.

Hattie folded up Will's letter and tucked it into her pocket. She returned to the task of sorting the mail, but her head was spinning. A man—and not just any man, a talented and handsome man—had asked her to marry him!

Hattie's emotions tugged her in opposite directions. One part of her desperately wanted to run away with Will and lead a life of adventure and abandon on the rodeo. The other part of her felt comfortable staying put with her family, the people she belonged to, the people who had given her a home.

Hattie continued to sort the mail and put it in the parlor for Edna Petunia and Cletus to see. The more Hattie thought about it, the more she realized that there was no way she could ever leave the Sanders family. A life with a rodeo cowboy might sound glamorous and exciting, but it would be an existence without roots, stability, or a sense of home.

As she moved on throughout her daily chores, she had the sinking realization that she would have to write back to Will Hart and decline his proposal. She had never done such a thing before and wasn't even sure how to go about it. She had written letters, of course, but they were mostly for school or to her sisters when their family responsibilities kept them from visiting the Sanders' home often enough to suit Hattie.

She wasn't even sure where to address the letter or if it would arrive in time. Will had used the postal service to deliver his message, but she knew he wouldn't be in town much longer.

After she set the table for lunch, Hattie pulled the letter out again. This time, she noticed a postscript scrawled on the back of the note that she hadn't seen before!

P.S. Meet me Friday night at ten o'clock at the fairgrounds with your answer. I'll be waiting.

Hattie's heart fluttered. She wanted to see Will again. She was practically dreaming of it. But she didn't trust herself to know what to do if they were standing face to face. She might run away with him on the spot!

Hattie couldn't explain it. If she thought about it in her head, there was no reason for Will to have such a strong hold over her. She barely knew him. All she did know was that he didn't have a lifestyle that seemed conducive to marrying or having children.

Children—Hattie had nearly forgotten about this aspect of a life on the road. She hadn't seen any children in the tent area where the rodeo cowboys and other performers lived. Would agreeing to marry

Will mean she'd have to give up plans of becoming a mother?

As she reasoned through it, Hattie realized that her fantasies about Will were just that—fantasies. He seemed like a perfectly nice man, funny and intelligent, handsome and caring—but he was, as Cletus sometimes said, ‘not the marrying type.’ She would have to go to the fairgrounds, look him in the eye, and tell him the truth. Her family meant far too much to her to abandon them. It would be difficult, but she would be able to get through it.

Hattie couldn't hide her distraction. As she swept the floors of the entry, Edna Petunia came up behind her and startled her. The broom clattered to the floor, and Edna Petunia sighed. “Hattie, what is it? You've been acting like a drunken goat all day!”

Despite herself, Hattie smiled. Edna Petunia had some strange expressions, but she had grown to love them. Another reason she could never leave her family for long periods of time.

“I'm still thinking about the rodeo,” Hattie confessed. She was telling the truth, just not the entire truth. She wished she were more comfortable talking to her parents about matters of romance, but she had never broached the subject with either Edna Petunia or Cletus. Plus, she knew they wouldn't understand.

“It was quite a sight, wasn't it?” Edna Petunia crowed, a smile dancing across her lips.

Hattie nodded. “It really was. I almost wish I could go back again and again.”

“If I were a younger woman . . .” Edna Petunia winked.

Hattie wasn't sure what she meant. “If you were a younger woman, what?”

“I might have had to run off with one of those devilishly handsome cowboys!” Edna Petunia joked. “I'm glad you, Theresa, and Katie have more sense than I did at your age. All of you are far too sensible to do a thing like that!”

Hattie's heart began racing. Edna Petunia had no idea how close to the truth she was. “Running away with a rodeo man does seem like a rather ill-informed decision.” Hattie spoke honestly.

“But, oh, the sights I could have seen.” Edna Petunia looked out the window wistfully. “Still, things worked out exactly the way they were supposed to.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “If I had run away with a rugged cowboy, I might not have met the love of my life or any of my darling bastards!”

Hattie couldn't help but chuckle. All the tension she had felt earlier had evaporated. This was her home, where she was safe and surrounded by people who loved her unconditionally. No matter what Will Hart could offer, he could never top this.

Still, the decision weighed on her as the hours ticked by. Friday

was the following evening, and she knew she'd need to sneak out of the house or come up with a different reason why she needed to go out late at night.

That evening after dinner, Hattie knew she needed to confide to someone. Cletus and Edna Petunia were in the formal parlor with Katie, who was singing to entertain them. Theresa and Hattie were washing and drying dishes in the kitchen.

Finally, Hattie couldn't take it any longer. "Theresa, can I tell you something that you can't tell a soul?"

Theresa looked up, interested. "Sure. What is it?"

Hattie dried her hands for a moment and pulled the letter out of her pocket. "Read this."

Hattie watched as Theresa unfolded the letter and reviewed it, taking each word in. Her mouth dropped open as she read the entire letter. "You've had a proposal of *marriage*? Do you even know this man?"

Hattie felt sheepish. She didn't have words to describe the strange connection she had felt with Will Hart. "We know each other a little but not that well. He's one of the men from the rodeo. Do you remember the cowboy we thought was the best performer?"

Theresa thought for a moment. "Didn't he only have one arm? He was very good!"

"Yes, that's Will!" Hattie felt a swell of pride simply talking about him.

"He was handsome," Theresa admitted. "But you wouldn't seriously consider running away, would you? We'd all miss you."

Hattie nodded. "That's exactly how I feel. I won't lie to you, Theresa—I'm intrigued by him. He's so handsome, and I'm sure he's had so many adventures and can teach me so much about the world. But it wouldn't be right to leave my family. And who knows if he'd be able to support me. I don't know what kind of money a man on the rodeo makes. I just wanted to tell someone."

"I understand," Theresa said thoughtfully. "I'm glad you told me. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to meet him tomorrow night," Hattie admitted. "I just need to come up with a reason why I'll be out of the house tomorrow night."

Theresa considered this for a moment. "I'm supposed to go to Penny's house tomorrow to help with the boys. Some of her in-laws are visiting, and she needs some assistance. You could say that you're helping me, and we could get a ride from Tom. We'll tell Tom that you're just going to see the rodeo, not any of the other details."

"That's a great idea. Do you think it will work?" Hattie asked anxiously.

Theresa smiled. “I think we can make it work. Don’t worry, Hattie
—your secret is safe with me!”

The hours dragged on as Hattie waited for Friday night to arrive. True to her word, Theresa helped Hattie get out of the house without so much as a question from Edna Petunia or Cletus.

"I owe you one," Hattie said gratefully.

Theresa waved her off. "I know you'd do the same for me if the situation were reversed. Plus, this is kind of exciting. A rodeo cowboy has never proposed to one of my sisters before!"

Hattie chuckled as they waited for Tom to pick them up. Penny's husband arrived promptly at seven, leaving plenty of time for Hattie to meet with Will at the appointed time.

"Tom, would you be able to make a stop at the Bagley fairgrounds? Hattie has a ticket for this evening," Theresa said smoothly.

Hattie marveled at Theresa's ease and confidence. She was lucky to have a sister helping her out.

Tom looked surprised but nodded. "That's fine. But—are you going to see the Wild West Show by yourself?"

Hattie nodded.

Tom tightened his grip on the reins. "You need to be careful. Some of those men—I don't know about them."

"What do you mean?" Theresa asked.

"I don't want to tell any falsehoods," Tom began. "But I've heard stories about men who are thieves and liars, moving from town to town, swindling anyone they come across. All I'm saying is be careful around those types of people."

Hattie felt a stab of fear course through her veins. She hadn't even considered the fact that Will's intentions might not be noble. She felt foolish for going to meet a man by herself. Yet something deep inside of her urged her to go to the fairgrounds and meet him. She had a sense that everything would work out. "Thank you for the warning, Tom. I'll be sure to watch out for men like that."

Tom grinned. "Good. Enjoy the show. I've heard it's excellent!"

"It is!" Theresa and Hattie exclaimed at the same time.

Tom looked puzzled. "You've already seen the show?"

Hattie looked down. "Yes, I've seen it before, and I liked it so much that I want to see it again." Her words were true, but she was

leaving something out—Will's letter and her feelings for him. Even now, she felt a tingling in her stomach as she thought about him and the way he looked when he was riding.

Tom nodded as they pulled up to the fairgrounds. "Just remember to be cautious."

"I will," Hattie promised.

Tom waited as Hattie climbed out, and he and Theresa waved goodbye. As they pulled away, the crowd swarmed around Hattie. Instead of feeling overwhelmed, she felt a shiver of anticipation. Will was somewhere nearby, and she would get to see him.

Hattie tried to search for Will before the show began, but he wasn't by the tents where she'd first met him. She remembered Tom's advice to be careful, so she looked on her own instead of asking if anyone had seen Will.

She circled the fairgrounds twice before she decided to take her seat in the pavilion. As she waited for the show to begin, she wondered what Will was doing to prepare for the show. She imagined him practicing in the meadow beyond the fairground or giving his horse a treat.

A few minutes later, the announcer interrupted Hattie's thoughts as he officially began the show. Hattie held her breath as she waited until Will appeared in the arena, riding the same horse he had in the previous show she'd seen. Each time he took center stage, Hattie was even more impressed with his skills and showmanship.

Hattie knew she wasn't alone because again, the crowd seemed to cheer extra loudly for Will. She wasn't sure if it was his determination, agility, or balance that made them root for him more than any of the other cowboys.

Although Hattie enjoyed the show, she also couldn't wait for it to be over because that meant a chance to speak to Will. Her heart sank as she realized that she didn't have good news to share with him. She wondered how he would take her answer.

Watching Will expertly handle his events made Hattie reconsider her decision. She didn't want to leave her family, but she felt alive and excited when she was with Will. She didn't want those feelings to go away.

Finally, the Wild West show ended with a grand finale where Will and a few other riders formed a human pyramid on horseback. Hattie couldn't believe how strong Will was. As the audience erupted into applause, Hattie watched Will bow and wave over and over again to the crowd. After the show, Hattie remained in her seat while the rest of the audience exited the pavilion. Once the crowd had dispersed, Hattie scrambled out of her seat to find Will. She peered up at the large clock posted on the wall of the pavilion. It was nearly ten

o'clock.

Sure enough, Will stood outside of the tents where she had first met him, his hand in his pocket. Hattie was grateful for the lampposts that cast beams of light onto the ground so she could see.

"Hattie!" Will cried, clearly excited to see her.

"Hi, Will," Hattie said shyly. She suddenly felt nervous and unsure.

Will took his hand out of his pocket and took one of her hands, drawing Hattie closer to him.

Hattie smiled up at him.

"I could get used to this," Will murmured into Hattie's sweet-smelling hair.

"Me too." The words escaped Hattie's mouth before she realized she was speaking out loud. She took a step back. "Will, I need to tell you something."

Will frowned and looked at the ground. "This can't be a good sign."

Hattie took a deep breath, mustering all of her courage. "I'm flattered by your proposal. I really am. You're very talented, and I can tell you're a good man."

Will grinned. "If I'm such a good man, why do I get the sense you're going to turn down my proposal?"

Hattie felt awful, but she knew she had to continue. "My family is here in Nowhere. My job, my parents, my sisters—my entire life is in Nowhere. I couldn't leave them."

Will nodded. "I understand. I just hoped it would be different."

"Me too," Hattie said in a small voice. Even though she was standing next to Will, she had never felt so alone. "I suppose I should go now."

Will's expression was hard to read. "I suppose you should."

Hattie turned to walk toward the entrance of the fairgrounds, where Tom had said he would pick her up. Before she could take a step, Will grabbed her wrist and spun her around.

He dipped Hattie backward so far that she thought she might fall, but he kept a steady grip on her and leaned close, whispering in her ear. "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

Hattie gasped for air. Her stomach felt like it was doing flips. Will was so close that their noses were practically touching. She couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Before she could react, Will pressed his lips against hers, probing passionately. Hattie had never been kissed on the lips before and found that she quite enjoyed the sensation. She pressed her lips right back against his and felt herself melting into the ground.

After a few moments, Hattie pulled herself backward. "I should go." Hattie rushed toward the exit, her thoughts a jumbled mess.

“Wait!” Will called as she hurried away.

Hattie spun around. “What?”

“Give me one more chance. I’ll meet you behind your house tomorrow at midnight. Be ready for me.” Will winked at Hattie, and she felt her stomach begin to tumble again.

“How do you know where I live?” Hattie knew she hadn’t told Will where the Sanders’ home was located.

Will smirked. “You’re one of the Sanders girls. Even us out-of-town folks know who you are.” His expression turned serious. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hattie bit her lip. She was already risking trouble with her parents by being here tonight instead of at Penny’s house, where she said she’d be. What Will was asking for was even more dangerous. At the same time, she was desperate to see him again. She couldn’t just walk away. Hattie nodded and turned back toward the exit. She quickened her pace so she wouldn’t make Tom wait. Her heart was still pounding, and she had no idea what to do.

When Hattie climbed into Tom’s wagon, he noticed that her hair was messy, and she had a dazed expression on her face. “Hattie! What happened to you?”

“Nothing!” Hattie declared quickly. She scooted over to sit next to Theresa.

“What happened?” Theresa whispered.

Hattie shook her head. She wasn’t ready to talk about what had happened between her and Will.

Hattie stayed quiet the entire ride back to the Sanders’ home. When they arrived, Cletus came outside to greet Tom. Cletus shook Tom’s hand. “I hope the girls were helpful to you and didn’t cause too much trouble!”

Tom chuckled. “It’s always a pleasure to have any of the girls visit our home. Theresa was a blessing. And I hope Hattie enjoyed herself —”

“With all of Tom’s sons and all of the orphans on the ranch!” Theresa interjected. Hattie shot her a look of gratitude.

Tom looked puzzled but didn’t say anything.

“Thank you for bringing the girls back here tonight,” Cletus said, clapping Tom on the back.

“It’s no trouble at all. I should be getting back though—Penny will worry about me otherwise,” Tom said, flashing a wide grin. Hattie could tell that he was still just as in love with Penny as the day he’d married her. She began to tear up as she imagined the way they cared for one another. She’d hoped that she could have something similar with Will—but now there was no chance of that happening.

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Hattie didn't tell either of her sisters about her midnight plans with Will, but she couldn't think of anything else all day. Edna Petunia complained that she was acting strangely but forgot about it after Hattie helped prepare a dinner of roast chicken with chocolate mousse for dessert.

While the rest of the family fell asleep, Hattie lied awake anxiously, staring at the ceiling in her bedroom. She would count until she lost track and then creep out into the hallway to see how far the hands on the clock had moved, using the light of a candle to see in the dark. It was half past eleven o'clock, and her heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest.

Hattie couldn't wait to see Will. She wondered if he would kiss her again as he had done at the fairgrounds. She tried not to get her hopes up. It had been the most magnificent experience she had ever had. She wished she could spend all day kissing him—and maybe more. Hattie's body felt things she'd never felt before. She was awfully curious about what else Will might be able to do to her body if given the opportunity.

Hattie didn't want to be late, so she decided to slip down the staircase and wait outside for Will. There was still plenty of time before the clock struck midnight, but she couldn't stay in her bed a moment longer.

Hattie pushed the door open carefully, hoping it wouldn't creak. She walked on her tiptoes out the door and gently closed it. She walked around to the back of the house and stood in the dark, waiting for Will.

The minutes felt like hours, and Hattie worried constantly. What if he had changed his mind and wasn't coming? What if he'd gotten lost? What if one of his horses was injured?

Hattie tried to steady her breath. She was getting anxious merely at the thought of being close to Will again.

After what seemed like ages, Hattie heard the *clip clop* of hooves against the Texas dirt. Her heart soared. He had come after all! In a few moments, Will rode into the distance. He was on horseback, with a large basket strapped to the saddle behind him and a lantern for light. He slowed the horse with his knees and trotted up toward Hattie. Gracefully, he swung his legs off the horse and dismounted. He used his good hand to grab the basket and set it and the lantern down on the ground, then tied his horse to a nearby post.

"Ah." Will took a deep breath as he looked at Hattie. She wore a dark shawl and a flowing skirt, and in the moonlight, she looked more beautiful than ever before. It was all he could do to stop himself from

trying to have relations with her on the spot. He had asked around about her, and he knew she was a good girl from a respectable family. If he wanted this to work out, he would have to be patient.

Hattie shifted nervously from foot to foot. The way Will looked at her made her feel uncomfortable, like he was having improper thoughts about her. Well, she was having plenty of inappropriate thoughts about him, too. It was a new feeling, and she giggled thinking about it.

“What’s so funny?” Will stepped closer and tucked a piece of hair behind Hattie’s ear.

Hattie’s heart rate went haywire. She struggled to catch her breath. Will’s proximity made her unable to focus on anything other than him.

“Well?” Will prompted.

Hattie looked down. “Nothing.”

Will gently cupped her chin and brought it up toward his face. “I’m sure it wasn’t nothing,” he said kindly. With that, he pressed his lips against hers, and once again, they were kissing.

Hattie couldn’t explain the sensations coursing through her body even if she tried. It seemed like every inch of her was on fire, coming alive at Will’s capable touch. Something in her brain was shouting at her, though, telling her to slow down.

Hattie took a deep breath and tried to concentrate.

Will noticed that Hattie had pulled away. “What’s wrong?”

Hattie smiled apologetically. “I really enjoyed that. But I—I’m not sure how to say this—I don’t feel like I know you!”

Will began to laugh. “I’m sorry, Hattie. I simply can’t help myself when I’m around you.”

The way he looked at her made Hattie think he was going to kiss her again, but then he turned around and picked up the lantern from where he’d placed it on the ground.

“I almost forgot!” Will cried. “I brought us some provisions.” He placed the lantern on his hook and opened the basket.

Hattie peered inside. There were cheeses, fruits, and pastries, covered in a checked gingham cloth. She couldn’t believe what trouble he had gone to in order to bring her a treat. “Thank you!”

Will looked pleased with himself. “You’re welcome.” He pulled out the cloth and shook it out.

Hattie caught the other end and together, they laid the sheet flat on the ground. Each of them took a seat, and Will began to lay the food from the basket out on the ground. “I’ve never had a picnic at midnight before,” Hattie said with a giggle.

“There’s a first time for everything.” Will winked.

Hattie blushed. She had a feeling she knew what he was talking about.

Will took another deep breath, determined to do the right thing. "I understand why you said no to my proposal. It hurts, but I know you're close to your family, and I admire that. But I wanted to show you I'm not like those other rodeo men. They drink and curse and run out on their women. I'm different. You have to believe me, Hattie."

Hattie swallowed. "I *do* believe you." The words were true. Although she had only met him days before, she could tell that he was a trustworthy man. A man she longed to spend the rest of her life with. "But . . ."

Before Hattie could explain herself further, the door to the house sprang open, and Cletus ran out of the house, holding a lantern. Edna Petunia followed close behind him, dressed in a nightgown and wearing socks in her hair.

"What do you think you're doing, trespassing on my property and harassing my daughter?" Cletus thundered. In the moonlight, Hattie could see that his face was a purple color.

Hattie stepped in front of Will protectively. "It's not his fault, Cletus."

"I'll deal with you later," Cletus grumbled. "But you—you rodeo cowboy!"

"Yes, sir." Will stood upright and walked up to Cletus, offering his hand. "Will Hart, sir."

"I don't care about your name, where you come from, how many tricks you can do on that little horse of yours!" Cletus spat angrily. "You are at my home in the middle of the night, disturbing my wife from her sleep! Do you know what happens when someone disturbs my wife from her sleep?"

"No, sir." Will looked down at the toes of his boots.

"Well, you're not going to get to find out because you are going to leave here right now, or else I'll send for the sheriff! And the sheriff does *not* appreciate being woken up in the middle of the night either!" It seemed like Cletus would never stop shouting.

Tears rolled down Hattie's cheeks. Will took her hand in his and squeezed it. "Don't cry, darling. He'll see," Will whispered into her ear. With that, he raced up to his horse, swiftly untied the rope, and jumped astride. In a matter of moments, he had disappeared into the darkness.

"Hattie Sanders," Edna Petunia declared, shaking her head. "You are in some serious trouble, young lady. You'd better explain yourself, and quickly." Edna Petunia's hair was sticking up in all different directions due to static electricity. Under any other circumstance, Hattie would have wanted to laugh. Instead, she just sobbed harder.

Hattie wanted to find the right words to explain that Will was a good man, but she couldn't get the words out. Instead, she ran back

into the house and raced up to her room. She was furious with her parents for interrupting what had been the best night of her life. Now she would never have a chance to say goodbye to Will Hart. He had ridden out of her life forever.

Edna Petunia paced across the floor in the formal parlor.

"Disciplining one of the bastards seems wrong, but we have to do it."

"I agree. Hattie needs to learn to follow our rules." Cletus said. "I don't understand what she was thinking, wanting to run off with one of those cowboys!"

"Hattie is young and impressionable," Edna Petunia reasoned. "Do you remember what you were like at her age?"

Cletus put his hands on his hips. "I'm sure I was more sensible than that!"

Edna Petunia arched one of her eyebrows. "You may think that now, but I highly doubt that. Sensible isn't the first word I'd used to describe you."

"What are you trying to say, Edna?" Cletus grouched.

"Just that I think you have other strong characteristics. Sensible isn't top of the list." Edna Petunia came closer to Cletus and leaned in to pinch his bottom.

Cletus pressed his lips together. "I'm still mad, though."

"I am, too, dear. Don't worry. We'll think of a suitable punishment." Edna Petunia grinned as she saw Cletus's stern face. She thought he was very cute when he was angry.

HATTIE SHOVELED MUCK into the trenches Cletus and some of her brothers-in-law had dug near their house. She couldn't believe how Edna Petunia and Cletus had chosen to punish her. The stench was overwhelming. It was surely going to permeate through her clothing, and then she'd certainly never get a chance to go near Will again.

Hattie's heart ached as she thought of Will. Cletus and Edna Petunia had no idea how kind and generous he was. She wished they would give him a chance instead of rushing to judge him.

If Hattie were bolder, she would have stood up to them, but instead, she simply accepted her punishment to clean up after the horses. As part of her punishment, Hattie also wasn't able to

accompany the family when they went into town or to visit one of her sisters. She would be allowed to go to church, but that was the only exception.

Hattie wanted to cry. The rodeo would soon leave town, and then she'd never see Will Hart again. She had never met a man as bold or as confident as he was, and the thrill she got when he was around was a feeling she'd never had before and probably would never have again.

As she worked through her task, Hattie tried to think of a way she could see Will again. Every plan she thought of would require her to sneak out of the house, and she knew that after the latest incident, Edna Petunia and Cletus would be carefully monitoring her activities.

Hattie had never been in trouble before, and she felt awful.

That evening, after dishes had been put away, Hattie sat in the formal parlor with Katie and Theresa while Cletus read in his armchair. Edna Petunia had fallen asleep sitting straight up, and she was snoring. Cletus was engrossed in a thick biography.

Katie tugged on Hattie's sleeve. "Tell us everything!"

Hattie smiled, amused. "About shoveling muck?"

Theresa made a face. "Not that. About why you got in trouble in the first place."

Hattie sighed. She had wanted to keep her relationship with Will private, but now that everyone seemed to know about it, she didn't see the harm in telling her sisters what had happened. "Will Hart brought me a picnic, and we ate it outside under the stars."

Katie looked away dreamily. "How romantic. What a perfect gentleman."

"But then Cletus chased him away," Hattie finished, growing sullen. "Now he'll never come back."

"You don't know that for sure," Theresa commented. "Unexpected things happen all the time."

"You didn't see the look on Cletus's face, though," Hattie said, thinking back to the previous evening. She had seen Cletus lose his temper before, but this was like nothing else.

"Why don't they like Will?" Theresa asked.

"I don't know, but it has something to do with the fact that he's a rodeo man," Hattie explained. "A lot of people seem to have a lot of opinions about men like him. If they just got to know him, they'd see what I see. A good, honest, caring man." Hattie's eyes filled with tears.

Katie squeezed Hattie's hand. "Don't cry, Hattie."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Theresa asked.

Hattie shook her head. "I can't think of a single thing that would change their minds."

Theresa took Hattie's other hand. "Well, we're here for you. No

matter what.”

Hattie smiled. She was grateful that her sisters were so understanding. Now, if only Cletus and Edna Petunia could feel the same!

Over in Bagley, Will’s timing was sloppy.

“What’s the matter with you, Will?” Jessie cried. “Have you been drinking?”

Will scowled as he climbed back onto his horse. He practiced the dismount again. Slightly better, but still not perfect.

“The great Will Hart has finally met his match!” Jessie’s husband, Robert Moore, laughed as he trotted up on his own horse. Robert was one of the oldest cowboys in the rodeo. Jessie watched every practice and every show, cooked for the performers, and helped clean up and move on to the next city. Over time, Will had grown close to the older couple. Since he hadn’t seen his family in years, they had become the closest thing he had to parents.

“What are you talking about?” Will frowned.

Robert smirked. “You’re never distracted. Only thing that can be causing this level of dysfunction is a woman.” Jessie let out a gasp.

Will tightened his grasp on the reins. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Robert and Jessie exchanged a look.

“Why don’t you tell us what’s going on?” Jessie suggested sympathetically. “Maybe we can help.”

Will shook his head and attempted the dismount again. This time, instead of gracefully landing on his feet, he had too much momentum and tumbled forward. He picked himself up, livid.

Now Robert looked concerned. “Son, why don’t you take a break and let’s sit down for a moment.”

Will didn’t want to stop rehearsing, but his knees ached, and he didn’t want to keep putting an undue burden on his horse, so he obliged. He and Robert joined Jessie in the pavilion seats.

“What’s going on, son?” Robert asked kindly.

Will took a deep breath. He was still embarrassed about what had happened at the Sanders’ house, and he didn’t feel like telling everyone in the rodeo about it. It was bad enough that Hattie had rejected his proposal, and it was humiliating that he’d been chased off the property by an old man.

Before he knew it, the words were spilling out, and Robert and Jessie nodded in understanding.

“I had no idea you felt that way about Hattie! Pretty little thing,” Jessie said.

“You know who she is?” Will frowned. He hadn’t mentioned her name.

“From the way you described her and her father, you must be talking about the young girl who got lost over by the performer tents. Her father came up, called her Hattie, and practically ran away with her. He was hotter than a hornet’s nest,” Jessie recalled. “I’m sure he’s mighty strict with his daughter. I’m not surprised he ran you off his property.”

“How big is this man? You didn’t think you could challenge him?” Robert mused.

Jessie elbowed him. “This is no time for joking, Robert! Will is hurting.”

Will had thought it would help to tell Robert and Jessie about Hattie, but instead, he felt more miserable. He stared glumly at the empty stage. “You know, I never thought I’d meet a woman who would interest me. Most young ladies I meet are only concerned with appearances and vanity. Hattie’s different.”

Jessie patted him on the shoulder. “You’re young, Will.”

“There’ll be other girls.” Robert winked. “Trust me, I would know.”

Jessie swatted him. “My husband is all talk, and you know that, Will. He proposed to me the minute I turned sixteen and hasn’t so much as looked at another woman since.”

“It’s true. I can’t deny it. I’m in love.” Robert leaned over and kissed his wife passionately.

Will sighed. He envied Robert and Jessie. Where other marriages were torn apart by the rodeo lifestyle, their love was as strong as ever.

Will woke in the morning with a renewed sense of focus. He

washed and dressed, taking care of his early morning chores with the other performers. He was in a small tent, but Robert and Jessie, right next door, had a much larger one. If he could convince Hattie to join him, he would have to see about getting a larger tent.

Will had been performing with the rodeo for nearly two years, and he loved it. While his family thought that his interest had just been a passing lark, he knew that he had found his home.

When he was on a horse, performing dazzling tricks, no one cared or even seemed to notice that he only had one arm. They cheered and hollered for him for his abilities, not for his differences. He knew that if he'd stayed in the small town he'd grown up in, people would treat him as if he were damaged. Here on the road with the other cowboys and performers, everyone was unique. Instead of being judged for their differences, they were celebrated.

When he'd fallen for Hattie, he had briefly considered leaving the show. It paid good money, and he had nothing to spend it on, so he'd been able to save a good amount. He had enough to support Hattie, if her judgmental father ever gave him a chance.

But then Will realized he could never leave the Wild West show. He felt more at home there, with Robert, Jessie, and the others, than he ever had in the small town he'd grown up in. Night after night, he got to do the things he loved, all in front of a lively, thrilled audience. It was his dream, and he was lucky to still be able to physically do the job. He intended to stay with the rodeo as long as he could ride a horse and rope a steer. And he hoped that would be a long, long time.

Still, he couldn't shake the thought of Hattie Sanders from his brain. He had traveled enough places to know that she was special, one of a kind. Robert said there would be other women in the next town, and there surely would be. But none of them would be Hattie.

As Will fed and watered his horse, a plan formulated in his mind. After he ate breakfast, he borrowed one of the rodeo's wagons and rode into Nowhere.

The mercantile was bursting with activity, and Will waited for the proprietor to finish helping several customers. He didn't want anyone

to overhear him—it was a small town, and word traveled fast.

“Excuse me,” Will said to the man behind the counter. “I think you can help me with a personal matter.”

Lewis blinked, surprised by the request. The man in front of him had a hook in the place where his right arm should be. “How can I be of assistance?”

“I’ve heard that you are related to Hattie Sanders,” Will began tentatively.

“That’s true. I’m her brother-in-law. Is she all right?” Lewis looked worried.

“She’s fine. I think.” Will hadn’t seen her since the night Cletus had chased him away. Now, Lewis looked downright uncomfortable. Will realized he needed to get to the point. “I’m hoping you can help me deliver a message to her.”

“What kind of message?” Lewis was baffled. Why was this stranger asking him for help?

Will sighed. It was apparent that he was going to have to lay out the whole, sordid story. “How long do you have?”

Lewis looked around the mercantile. After the burst of activity, the customers had all left. The mid-morning rush was over. Instinctively, he walked to the front of the mercantile and closed the blinds. “I don’t know you, but you seem awfully troubled. Have a seat.” He gestured to a pair of armchairs that were on display.

Will nodded gratefully and sat down. Lewis did the same. “To make a long story short, I’m in love with Hattie. Deeply.”

Lewis looked surprised but recovered quickly. “She’s a wonderful young woman. All of Ruby’s sisters are very good with our little ones. It’s a great family.”

“And I’d love to be part of that family, except there’s one big problem.” Will looked at Lewis meaningfully. “Cletus and Edna Petunia hate me.”

Lewis nodded in understanding. “They can be rather . . . overprotective. I think it’s because they adopted the girls so late in life. They know that they’re lucky to have a big family, and they would do anything to protect their daughters.”

“That makes sense,” Will said. “But they’ve forbidden us to see each other. We leave town tomorrow. What am I going to do?”

Lewis paused, perplexed. “I’m not sure what you want me to do to help. I feel for your situation, but I’m not particularly influential with my in-laws. We’re family, and we love each other, but I can’t convince them to do something they don’t want to do.”

“All I’m going to ask you to do is simple,” Will explained. “I’ve written a letter to Hattie. Can you get it to her today? I don’t have time to wait for the postal service.” He pulled a slim envelope out of

his pocket and extended it to Lewis.

Lewis gulped. "I'd have to think of a way to get it to her without her parents seeing. If they found out, they'd never forgive me."

"I understand the risk I'm asking you to take is a big one. But I'm in love, and I have no other options. I heard from some of the men in Bagley that you run this mercantile and you're a fair and honest man. I thought I owed it to myself, and to Hattie, to at least try." Will stood up. "I need to go now. I appreciate your time, and I humbly ask you to consider my request. I'll leave the letter with you."

Lewis stood up, too, and the two men shook hands. As Will walked out of the mercantile, Lewis bit his lip. He understood Will's predicament all too well. When he was courting Ruby, there was nothing—not even a troublesome former fiancé—that could have stopped him from pursuing her. On the other hand, he did not want to incur the wrath of Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders.

Lewis tucked the letter into his pocket and opened the blinds to the mercantile. He had a decision to make.

HATTIE PULLED each piece of clothing from the line and folded it into neat piles. Her punishment for meeting Will in the middle of the night was not over, and she was exhausted from the chores and cranky since she hadn't been able to socialize with any of her sisters for days. Katie and Theresa tried to find opportunities to talk to her or keep her company while she did her tasks, but Edna Petunia would often scold them, telling them they were a distraction. They had even told Lewis that Theresa would work in Hattie's place at the mercantile, so Hattie didn't even have the chance to go to her normal work place.

It was going to be another long day at the Sanders household. Edna Petunia had given Hattie a list that was two handwritten pages, front and back. There was no way Hattie would be able to complete all of it in one day.

Hattie sighed and squinted up at the sun. Suddenly, she heard hoofbeats. A wagon approached in the distance. She frowned. They weren't expecting anyone today.

As the wagon got closer, Hattie saw that it was her brother-in-law, Lewis, driving. Hattie smiled. Lewis was a kind and funny man. Talking to him would be a welcome break from her endless list of responsibilities.

As Lewis pulled the wagon to a stop and began to climb out, Hattie walked up to him. Before she got close to him, Edna Petunia came racing out of the house and elbowed her way in front of Lewis.

"Lewis, what are you doing here?" Edna Petunia cried. "Hattie,

back to work!"

"Yes, Edna Petunia," Hattie sighed. She returned to the clothesline, but she was close enough to overhear Lewis's conversation with Edna Petunia.

"I received a new shipment of oranges, and I know how much you enjoy them." Lewis gestured to a crate inside the wagon. "Where would you like me to put them?"

"Oh, thank you, Lewis!" Edna Petunia said. "Follow me into the kitchen, I have just the spot."

Lewis gathered the crate from the wagon and walked behind Edna Petunia toward the house.

As Edna Petunia passed by Hattie, she stopped. "Hattie, you look so sad. Would an orange cheer you up?"

Hattie was too surprised to respond.

"Lewis, give her an orange from the crate," Edna Petunia commanded.

Lewis quickly did as Edna Petunia had requested.

"Thank you," Hattie said gratefully.

"You're welcome," Lewis replied. Edna Petunia continued into the house. Before Lewis followed her, he handed Hattie a folded slip of paper. "Don't tell anyone I gave you this."

Hattie took the paper in confusion.

Edna Petunia called back to Lewis from the front door. "This way, Lewis! I don't have all day!"

Lewis looked terrified. "Don't show this to your parents!"

Hattie nodded quickly even though she had no idea what Lewis was talking about. Lewis raced after Edna Petunia. Hattie could hear the oranges bouncing around in the crate as he ran toward the house.

Hattie set her orange down near where she was folding the laundry to save it for later. She unfolded the piece of paper Lewis had given her. What could be so important that it would be in a note that she wasn't allowed to tell anyone about?

Her heart raced as she saw the sloping signature at the bottom of the page—*Will Hart*. He hadn't forgotten about her after all! Maybe there was still hope.

As Hattie read the letter, her heart sank. Will was once again asking her to risk everything by seeing him one last time at the final Wild West show before the troupe left Bagley. Hattie yearned to see Will again and give him a proper send-off, but there was no way her parents would allow her out of the house for any reason, let alone to see a man she was forbidden to see perform in a rodeo.

Still, she had to admit that Will's words were persuasive.

Hattie,

I enjoyed our moonlight picnic more than you will ever know. You are

smart, funny, and kind—not to mention beautiful. In my many travels, I have never met a woman like you. I understand that your devotion to your family will prevent you from joining me on the road. It's the biggest regret of my life that we can't be together, but I admire your strength of character and conviction to stay with your family. I hope very much that you will consider seeing me one last time at the final Wild West show tonight. It would mean a lot to me if you met me near the tents just before the performance begins.

If you cannot come, please know that I will never stop loving you, Hattie Sanders.

Will Hart

Love! Will still loved her. Hattie couldn't believe it. She wanted to stow away in Lewis's wagon and ask him to drop her off at the fairgrounds then and there so she could declare her love for him, too.

Edna Petunia and Lewis came out of the house, and Hattie quickly folded the letter and looked around for a place to put it. Not finding one, she stuffed it into her bosom.

Edna Petunia eyed her suspiciously. "Hattie, you don't look like you're folding laundry!"

"Just taking a break to stretch, Edna Petunia!" Hattie called back. She made a show out of holding her arms out to the sides and waving them around.

Edna Petunia shook her head. "I don't know what's gotten into that bastard," she said loudly.

Lewis coughed. He knew that Edna Petunia had some peculiarities of speech, but that one in particular he had never fully gotten used to. "I had better get back to the mercantile."

"It was awfully nice of you to come just to bring me oranges," Edna Petunia said. Suddenly, she turned sharply and looked back and forth between Hattie and Lewis. "You said the shipment came in today?"

Lewis fidgeted. "Yes, ma'am."

"I thought Hattie told me that shipments only come on the days she works. And today's not one of her normal days." Edna Petunia spoke in an accusatory tone.

Lewis swallowed hard. He was in trouble now. Edna Petunia and Cletus had always treated him kindly, but he had heard enough stories about the Sanders family to know that he did not want to find out what happened when you were on their bad side. "I, uh—" Lewis stammered.

Hattie thought quickly, hoping to come up with a solution to Edna Petunia's question, but she had bent the truth so frequently in the past few days, she had nothing left.

Lewis backed up toward the wagon.

“I see what’s going on here!” Edna Petunia declared, planting her hands firmly on her hips.

Hattie looked down at the ground mournfully. She had already been punished more severely than her parents had ever disciplined any of her sisters before. Was Edna Petunia about to make it worse?

Instead, Edna Petunia began to chuckle. “You came here to see Hattie and make sure she was doing all right. You’ve been worried about her since Theresa has been working at the store. That’s it, isn’t it?”

Lewis let out a deep breath of relief. “Yes! That’s it!”

Hattie nodded. “It was kind of you to check on me.”

“Any time, Hattie.” Lewis tipped his hat to her. “Now, I should get going.”

“I understand,” Edna Petunia said.

As Lewis rode off into the distance, Edna Petunia looked at her daughter with a stern expression on her face. “Is there anything else you’ve been keeping from me, Hattie?”

Hattie felt like two forces were tugging her in opposite directions. It might be a relief to explain to Edna Petunia that Will truly cared for her and wanted her to meet him at the rodeo that evening. On the other hand, she knew she needed to keep Will’s correspondence a secret. Lewis had warned her not to tell her parents anything. She already knew how judgmental they could be, and she didn’t want to give them any more reasons.

“No, Edna Petunia,” Hattie said quietly, looking at the ground. She hated feeling dishonest. But something deep inside of her kept telling her that she was meant to be with Will, and if she was just a little patient, everything would work out the way it was supposed to.

When Cletus came home from work, he granted Hattie a brief reprieve from her chores. "You're doing a good job, dear. You can take a break after dinner as long as you get back to work first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Cletus." Hattie went up to her room to change for dinner. As she passed the large clock in the hall, she realized that if she wanted to get to the rodeo before the show started, she would need to leave quickly.

All through dinner, Hattie tried to think of a reason her parents would take her to Bagley or a way she could sneak out to the fairgrounds. None of the plans she thought of had any chance of working.

As Theresa chattered about working in Hattie's place at the mercantile, Hattie was withdrawn and quiet all throughout dinner. After dinner, Theresa helped Katie and Hattie with the dishes while Edna Petunia and Cletus retired to the formal parlor.

"All right, Hattie—are you going to tell us what's going on with you?" Theresa asked.

Hattie didn't even think about hiding the truth. "Will Hart invited me to see him again this evening," Hattie explained. "I want to go, but I can't!"

Katie gasped. "He still cares for you!"

"What are you going to do?" Theresa fretted.

Hattie shook her head sadly. "The more I think about it, the more I realize that I can't go. He wants me to run away with him, with the rodeo. I could never do that to Edna Petunia or Cletus. And I wouldn't want to live that lifestyle. I like my life here in Nowhere."

Theresa nodded and passed Hattie a dinner plate. "I understand, Hattie."

Hattie dried the plate off with a rag and put it back in the cupboard. Working with her sisters made her feel comfortable and happy. Although a part of her would always wonder what the life of a rodeo cowboy's wife might be like, she was content with the way things were in Nowhere. She knew she was making the right choice. She just hated that it felt so bad.

After the girls had finished washing and putting away the dishes, they joined their parents in the formal parlor. Cletus taught the girls a new card game, and the girls giggled as he lost hand after hand. Theresa won easily, but Cletus declared it beginner's luck. Hattie's heart sang as she looked around at her family. Back at the orphanage, she would have never thought a home like this was a possibility. It was hard to say no to Will Hart, but she knew it was the right thing to do to choose her family.

Soon, Hattie found herself yawning and excused herself to her room. She fell asleep quickly, but soon, she dreamed restlessly. In her dreams, she was in the middle of an arena, and the entire town was looking at her and laughing, making fun of her. Hattie looked down at the ground, and there was Will Hart, lying on the ground, howling in pain.

Hattie kept trying to ask Will what was wrong, but he wouldn't answer.

Hattie woke up from the dream in a sweat. A panicky feeling weighed on her chest. She tried to close her eyes and get back to sleep, but her body wouldn't let her.

She remembered Will's hand moving across her body, and the way his lips had tasted against hers. Would she truly never see him again? Hot tears stung her eyes as she imagined the rest of her life without him.

She had made up her mind. She was staying with her family. So why did it still hurt so badly when she thought about a life without him in it?

Hattie rolled over, trying to get comfortable. Her thoughts drifted to the horses. She could take one of them and slip off into the night, returning before dawn. It was risky if she got caught, but if she was careful enough, her parents would never know.

Hattie thought about it for a while. She decided it was worth it if she got to see Will one last time.

Hattie saddled the horse and set out in the dark, feeling terrified but also thrilled at the possibility of seeing Will. She held a lantern as they galloped toward Bagley. She tried not to think of how much trouble she would be in if Edna Petunia and Cletus found out about her evening exploits.

As she raced toward the fairgrounds, the rest of the crowd was headed in the opposite direction. Hattie's heart sank as she realized she had completely missed the show. She had hoped to catch the grand finale, especially one of the parts where Will did especially impressive tricks, dazzling the audience on horseback.

Hattie hoped that Will would still be there and hadn't already left town. She didn't think it was likely that the entire Wild West show

would pack up in the middle of the night and leave, but stranger things had happened.

Hattie tied the horse to a post just outside the fairgrounds and pushed through the lingering crowd to find Will. She rushed to the tents where they had first met, but everything was dark. She thought people might be trying to sleep in the tents, and she didn't want to wake them. But Will was nowhere to be found, and she had to find him—she just knew it.

Hattie stepped around the tents, whispering his name urgently. "Will! Will!"

Jessie popped her head out of one of the larger tents. "He's in that one, love," Jessie said merrily, as if Hattie showing up in the middle of the night was a regular occurrence.

Hattie smiled gratefully at the older woman. "Thank you!"

Hattie stood outside of the tent where Jessie thought Will was. "Will!" Hattie hissed. "It's me! It's Hattie!"

A muscular arm shot out of the tent and pulled Hattie inside.

Hattie gasped in surprise, then smiled in relief as Will's handsome face came into focus by the lantern's light. "It's so good to see you," Hattie blurted out.

Will took a deep breath. "I could say the same thing to you. When you didn't come before the show, I thought I'd lost you forever."

"I'm so sorry!" Hattie cried.

"It's okay," Will soothed, pulling her close to his chest.

Hattie closed her eyes and relaxed in Will's embrace. When she was in his arms, everything in the world made sense. All was well. But Hattie knew it wasn't fair to make him think that she was going to run away with him. As painful as it was, she had to tell him.

Will couldn't believe Hattie was in front of him in the flesh. He had dreamed about her ever since they had met, so the fact that she was in his tent was rather astounding. "I can't believe you came," he said with a huge smile on his face.

"Will," Hattie began, taking a deep breath. "I need to tell you something."

Will's face fell. He knew whatever she had to tell him wasn't going to be good. In an instant, he knew exactly what she had come there to say. He put his hand up. "Please. I know what you're going to say, and I respect your decision. But for this one night, can we pretend that it's not true?"

Hattie nodded eagerly, relieved she didn't have to spell out the words. After all, she'd already told Will exactly how she felt. She would have loved to take him up on his proposal, but it wasn't possible. She wasn't going to leave her family.

Will took Hattie's face and brought it closer to his. He kissed her

slowly and deliberately, and once again, Hattie's body felt strange and wonderful sensations all over. When she was with Will, she felt unstoppable, like she could go anywhere or do anything.

Will's hand fumbled with Hattie's blouse. He began to undo some of the buttons. Hattie jumped to her feet. "What are you doing?"

Will's face turned beet red. "I'm sorry, Hattie. I shouldn't have done that. I got carried away."

Hattie felt unexpected tears cloud her vision. "You're right. You shouldn't have done that!" She turned and rushed out of the tent.

Will followed after her as she ran toward the entrance to the fairgrounds. "Wait, Hattie! Please!"

Hattie shook her head as she ran. The truth was, she was terrified by how powerful her feelings for Will were. She couldn't trust herself to stay in that tent any longer than she had. She longed to feel his touch in new and different ways. The way a wife might feel a husband's touch.

But Edna Petunia and Cletus had made it clear that Will and Hattie would never be husband and wife. There was no point in temptation and making a bad decision she could never take back.

Hattie untied the horse and hopped on. Will was about to mount his horse, but Hattie held her hand up. "Please, Will, just stop! I need to be alone."

Will saw Hattie's expression and knew she was serious. He respected her wishes and nodded. "I love you, Hattie Sanders!" Will called after her.

Hattie wiped the tears from her face with one hand as she steered the horse back toward Nowhere. She couldn't believe all she had risked for a man she barely knew. She didn't know much about rodeos, but she knew one thing for sure—cowboys only led to broken hearts.

When Hattie approached the Sanders' house, she was quiet as a mouse as she returned the horse to its original spot in the stable and crept through the back door. She sneaked up the staircase as softly as possible and slipped into her room. It seemed like everyone else in the house was sound asleep, and Hattie was grateful for it.

As she changed into her nightgown, she replayed the evening's events over and over again in her head. The feelings she experienced with Will were beyond comparison. She wished she could do that every day for the rest of her life. But she also was afraid of what Cletus had said. He didn't have a high opinion of Will or his friends who worked in the Wild West show. Could Hattie really trust Will?

It was all too much to think about as she tried to go to sleep. She rolled over, unable to get comfortable in the dark. Thoughts kept racing through her mind. What was she going to do?

WILL Hart shined his shoes with a rag over and over again outside the tents.

“Son, if you’re not careful, you’ll shine that shoe into smithereens!” Robert remarked.

“You should be packing!” Jessie chided. “You don’t want Mr. Ingalls to leave town without you, do you?”

Mr. Ingalls was the owner and operator of the Wild West show. Each day, he sold tickets and collected payments, and each night, he announced all of the acts. He was a good man, but he also was prone to drinking, and sometimes that meant he got behind in his payments to some of the performers.

After the final show in each town, Mr. Ingalls would lead a caravan of horses and wagons the following morning and set off for the next stop on the rodeo tour. Will had a tendency to sleep in, and Mr. Ingalls often threatened to leave him behind.

Will grinned confidently. “He won’t leave without me.”

Jessie swatted at Will’s head, but she was smiling. “How’d you get so full of yourself, Will? It certainly wasn’t under my watch.”

Will simply shrugged, continuing to polish the shoes.

“I can’t take it any longer.” Robert sighed dramatically. “Why is it so important that your shoes be perfect?”

Will took a deep breath. “I’m going into town.” Will was afraid to be more specific. He didn’t want to bring any bad luck to his trip to Nowhere. His mission was already an uphill battle at best. He didn’t need any other pressure.

Will finished shining and stood up. He tipped his hat. “Wish me luck.”

“For what?” Jessie wondered out loud.

“Good luck, I guess,” Robert put in.

Will chuckled and waved goodbye. He walked to the makeshift stables where they kept the horses and found Cranapple, his trustiest steed.

“Ready for a journey?” Will asked Cranapple as he let her out of her stall. He took an apple out of his bag and fed it to her.

Cranapple licked his face happily.

Will found a saddle and placed it on Cranapple’s back, then mounted the glossy brown horse. “Here goes nothing,” Will whispered as they set off.

The trip to Nowhere seemed long and uneventful. Will considered turning back more than once, the nerves nearly overtaking him, but they carried forward.

When they arrived in Nowhere, Will searched the storefronts for

the one he was looking for. He saw a bank, an ice cream parlor, an auction house, a mercantile, and other establishments. Finally, his eyes came to a stop on a nondescript door with a small sign out front—*Town Judge*.

Will tied Cranapple to a post and gave her some water from the flask he'd packed. He patted her. "Wish me luck, girl." He walked toward the door and knocked on it.

To Will's surprise, a young man opened the door. "How can I help you?"

Will's nerves returned. "I'm looking for Cletus Sanders. Am I in the right place?"

The man smiled and held the door open wider. "You sure are. Come on in."

Will stepped through the entryway and saw Cletus sitting at a large table. When Cletus saw Will, he immediately frowned. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be gallivanting around upside down on a horse?"

Will fought the urge to fire back a sarcastic retort. He was determined to keep calm. No matter what Cletus said to him, he would focus on the reason he had come here in the first place. "I'd like to talk to you."

Timothy Parker shoved his hands into his pockets. He didn't know who the one-armed man in front of him was, but he could have cut the tension between the stranger and Cletus with a butter knife. "I'm going to run an errand. I'll give you two some time." He nodded to Cletus and walked out the door.

Will looked at the table. "May I sit down, sir?"

Cletus frowned. "Fine. I don't have all day, though."

"I have strong feelings for your daughter, Judge Sanders," Will began. He had learned from some of the locals who had visited the fairgrounds that Cletus was the town judge and that he suffered no fools. Will hoped he could prove to Cletus that he was worthy of his daughter.

"You'll have to be more specific," Cletus grunted, holding up some newspaper in front of his face.

"I intend to marry Hattie," Will said boldly. It was just like his work with horses. He had to be confident, to say what he meant and mean what he said.

Cletus laughed. "I'm not sure why you're sharing your hopes and dreams with me."

Will sighed. The old man was going to make this difficult. "I know you have some . . . issues with my profession."

An angry look flashed across Cletus's face. "I don't have issues! Your profession has issues."

Will softened his tone. "Sir, I know Hattie holds you and your wife in the highest regard. If you would just give me a chance—"

Cletus held a hand up. "I've heard enough."

Will couldn't contain his temper any longer. "If you have a problem with me, tell me what it is!"

Cletus stood up. "I think men who join the rodeo have never truly grown up. The Wild West Show is fun to go see, but it's not the lifestyle I want for one of my daughters. I don't think you'd be able to give Hattie the life she deserves."

Will took all of this in, trying to figure out what to say in response. "I understand your concern, sir. I want what's best for Hattie just the same as you."

Cletus fixed his gaze on Will. "That's hard for me to believe, son. For instance, where would you live?"

"There are tents, sir. Other couples live in the tents, and the wives travel with us each time we change towns." As the words poured out of Will's mouth, he realized it didn't sound like a very stable life.

"And I expect you'd bring children into these tents?" Cletus looked as though he was going to burst into laughter.

Will fought back a swell of emotion. He knew he had a lot he could offer Hattie, but he was having trouble finding the right words to explain it to Cletus. "The thing is—" Will stammered.

Cletus waited impatiently.

Will finally blurted out what was in his heart. "I love your daughter. I want to be with her. I swear to you, I'll do everything in my power to give her everything she could ever want in life. I may not know how or when that will happen, but you have my word, it *will* happen."

Cletus stopped scowling. He worried he was becoming soft in his old age because in that moment, he bore no ill will toward Will Hart. The young man clearly had feelings for Hattie, and Cletus didn't blame him. His daughter was beautiful, intelligent, and kind, a combination of qualities that was rarely present in young women of her age. "I believe you, son. I just don't think you're considering the realities of the hardships you two would face. I'm sorry. I can't allow it."

Will realized that Cletus was not going to budge from his position. He was glad the old man was candid, but that didn't make the sting of rejection hurt any less. "I'm beginning to understand your perspective, sir. I've taken enough of your time. I hope you'll reconsider. If you do, I'll be at the rodeo for just one more night until we move on to the next town."

"Take care of yourself, son," Cletus said gently.

"Thank you, sir." Will tipped his hat and exited the building.

Outside, the man who'd let him in paced nervously. "I'm Timothy Parker," he said, extending his hand.

Will shook Timothy's hand. "Will Hart. Pleased to meet you."

"I hope Cletus wasn't too hard on you. In addition to being my boss, he's also my father-in-law," Timothy explained.

Will smiled in spite of his sadness. "You must be a very patient man."

Timothy shrugged. "I don't know about that. But I do know that Cletus's bark is worse than his bite. I hope you don't take it personally."

"I appreciate it," Will said cordially. "Unfortunately, Cletus doesn't much care for me, and I don't see that changing any time soon."

Timothy wore a pained expression. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Will forced a grin. "Well, you can't win 'em all. I apologize for disrupting your day. Take care."

Timothy nodded quickly. "You as well."

Will untied and skillfully mounted Cranapple. Together, they set off for the fairgrounds. He hadn't even started packing yet, and he was responsible for the gear and equipment used during the show in addition to his own belongings. It was going to be a long day.

When Cletus returned home from work that evening, he found Edna Petunia waiting for him outside.

Edna Petunia gestured inside the house. "We have a problem."

Cletus's heart clenched. "What kind of problem?"

Edna Petunia chuckled and swatted his arm. "Probably not whatever you're thinking!"

Cletus followed Edna Petunia into the house, scared of what awaited him inside. As his mind flitted through worst case scenarios, he saw Hattie, sadly sweeping a dust rag back and forth in the entry way.

"That's the problem," Edna Petunia whispered.

Cletus was confused. "Hi, Hattie!"

Hattie paused. "Hi, Cletus," she said slowly, without any emotion. She resumed dusting, moving like molasses.

Edna Petunia shrugged. "See? I told you." Edna Petunia led Cletus into the formal parlor. "What are we going to do?"

Cletus had never seen Hattie so listless. "Have you tried talking to her?"

"Of course I've tried talking to her!" Edna Petunia exclaimed, indignant. "She seems to be broken-hearted over that one-armed cowboy. Poor little bastard."

"Speak of the devil, that cowboy came down to my office today, saying he intends to marry her!" Cletus said grumpily. "Any man who would be in a traveling rodeo is a good-for-nothing troublemaker."

"I must admit, though, he was a looker." Edna Petunia looked into the distance dreamily.

"Now I need to worry about you running off with the rodeo, too?" Cletus complained. "It's enough stress to give a man palpitations."

"Oh, hush. Don't be so dramatic." Edna Petunia smirked. "No matter how handsome that cowboy might be, there's only one man in the world for me."

Cletus grinned. After so many years of being alone, he truly had found his soulmate. He knew that he and Edna Petunia were very lucky.

"Now, what are we going to do about Hattie?" Edna Petunia

persisted.

"I hate to say it, but I'm stumped," Cletus admitted. "I didn't realize the two of them cared for each other so deeply. I thought it was merely a passing crush."

Edna Petunia nodded. "What did Will say when he came to see you?"

Cletus thought back to the conversation. "He assured me that he was going to do everything he could to give Hattie everything she's ever wanted."

"Wow. It sounds like he really does love her." Edna Petunia's heart went out to her daughter and Will. She knew what it was like to love someone but not be able to be with them due to circumstances. Her first love had died just before their wedding. She had lived decades of her life alone before she'd met Cletus, and she hoped Hattie wouldn't suffer a similar fate.

"Do you think I've been too hard on him?" Cletus asked, cutting into Edna Petunia's thoughts.

Edna Petunia considered her husband's question. "I know you were just trying to protect our Hattie."

"That's right." Cletus sighed. "So why do I feel like I've made a terrible mistake?"

Edna Petunia was surprised to hear her normally decisive husband sound so unsure. Cletus prided himself in his ability to consider all the angles of a situation and resolve them swiftly and fairly. That was one of the reasons the people of Nowhere chose to elect him. "Maybe you need to sleep on it," Edna Petunia suggested.

Cletus brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Thank you, my darling. I don't know what I'd do without you."

In the entryway, Hattie dusted lethargically. Her parents' voices carried through the house, but she didn't mind that they were talking about her. She didn't mind anything. She just wanted to go to sleep. She didn't care if she ate dinner or not. All she wanted to do was to close her eyes and dream of things that had nothing to do with cowboys, rodeos, or weddings.

No matter how hard she tried to focus on the dusting, her thoughts kept returning to Will Hart and his proposal. She wondered what he was doing at that very moment. She had overheard some men talking about how they were moving on to the next town in Texas.

She imagined Will in another small town, performing and gaining the adoration and praise of all its citizens. She pictured young women throwing themselves at him after the show. For a man like Will Hart, she was sure women came as easily as water flowed through a winding river.

As she thought about Will settling down with a pretty young

woman, she did not cry. Her tears had come and gone. Now she felt numb. She didn't like thinking about Will moving on without her, but she felt helpless. There was nothing she could do.

Hattie poured the little energy she had left into scrubbing with the dust rag. She dusted the door frames, the railings, the walls—everything she could think of. When she was done, she still had an hour to fill before it was time for dinner.

When Hattie was with Will, she felt young and alive. She was full of hope and the possibilities the future held. Now she felt hardened. She had nothing to look forward to. Was this what the rest of her life would be like?

“*A*nd there’s Aunt Hattie, Aunt Theresa, and Aunt Katie!”

Dorothy Reeves explained cheerfully to her youngest son. Dorothy, one of Hattie’s sisters, and Carter, her husband, were visiting the Sanders’ house briefly to drop off their boys for a few days. Dorothy and Carter would be traveling to visit Carter’s family, and their sons were too young to make the trip.

Hattie tried to smile at her nephews, but she still felt drained and exhausted from everything that had happened with Will.

Dorothy immediately noticed something was wrong, but she decided to save her inquiries for later when less people were around.

Hattie forced herself to eat a few bites at dinner, but she wasn’t hungry. Even though they dined on Edna Petunia’s pork chops, which Hattie normally loved, her heart just wasn’t in it.

After dinner, it was Theresa and Katie’s turn to wash the dishes, and Carter and Cletus retired to the formal parlor together. Edna Petunia followed them.

Dorothy grabbed Hattie’s hand. “Let’s go for a walk outside. It’s a beautiful night.”

Hattie looked at Dorothy in surprise. It wasn’t usual to go outside after dinner. She didn’t feel like making a fuss, so she quietly agreed.

Once they were outside, Dorothy looked Hattie straight in the eyes. “What’s wrong, Hattie?”

Hattie sighed. “I don’t want to trouble you.”

“You’re my sister, and I care for you.” Dorothy smiled. “You’re not troubling me. What’s on your mind?”

They continued to walk away from the house. Hattie didn’t want her parents to overhear. “I met a man.”

Dorothy’s eyes widened. “You have to tell me more than that, Hattie!”

“The man is in the rodeo. His name is Will Hart, and he’s a cowboy and performer in the Wild West show Cletus took us to,” Hattie continued.

“And you . . . care for him?” Dorothy prompted. It was funny for her to think about her younger sisters growing up and having romances. To Dorothy, Hattie, Theresa, and Katie would always be her

baby sisters even though they were grown young women and old enough to marry and begin families of their own.

Hattie nodded. "He asked me to marry him."

Dorothy gasped. "It was that serious? What are you going to do?"

"It's already been decided for me," Hattie explained sadly. "Cletus and Edna Petunia hate him. They say a man in the rodeo is not the kind of man I would want to settle down with."

"Oh, Hattie, that's awful. Do you know why?" Dorothy asked.

"It has something to do with him not being able to provide me a stable lifestyle," Hattie replied. It hurt her just to talk about Will. Again, she wondered what he was doing at that very moment.

"I see." Dorothy felt sorry for Hattie, but she wasn't sure what she could do about it. When her parents had their minds made up about something, there was usually no budging their position.

"It's all such a mess!" Hattie cried. Earlier that day, she had been in shock and too numb to experience her emotions. Now, talking about her situation, they all flooded back.

"Tell me about him," Dorothy suggested gently.

"Well, he's tall and handsome, and he's the most skilled man I've ever seen on a horse. But it's not only riding, it's roping, too," Hattie gushed. "The way he looks at me makes me feel like I'm the only person in the world, that's how closely he pays attention to me."

"Wow. He sounds really wonderful." Dorothy wondered if Cletus and Edna Petunia had really given this man a fair chance, or if they had simply judged him by his job. Everything Hattie had described sounded like ideal characteristics for a spouse.

"He's the best man I've ever met," Hattie said honestly. "And Dorothy, he does all of his tricks with only one arm!"

"He performs with one hand behind his back?" Dorothy was confused.

Hattie shook her head. "He only has one arm."

"Was he born that way, or was there an accident?" Dorothy asked, curious.

Hattie shook her head again. "I don't know. I didn't get the chance to ask."

"How many times have you seen him?" Dorothy wondered.

"I sneaked off to see the rodeo a third time," Hattie admitted. "And then he came to our house for a picnic under the stars."

"Oh, Hattie, how romantic!" Dorothy breathed.

"Until Cletus woke up and chased him away." Hattie's expression crumpled as she recalled watching Will race away.

"Oh, no!" Dorothy had no idea that Hattie had been secretly meeting up with her beau.

"And then, one final time, I went to meet him on his final show at

the rodeo. That was last night. They've probably moved on to the next town," Hattie finished sadly.

"That sounds very difficult, Hattie. I'm sorry you're going through that." Dorothy wished there was something she could do to help.

"I can understand where Edna Petunia and Cletus are coming from," Hattie said.

"You do?" Dorothy asked.

"When Will proposed to me, I told him I was flattered, but there was no way that I could leave my family," Hattie recounted.

"Did he want you to run away with him?" Dorothy couldn't believe the twists and turns Hattie's story was taking!

"There are some husbands and wives who travel together. Will said that we could do that," Hattie said. "I never thought I would meet a man who would make me want to be with him all the time. But Will is that man." Hattie felt her face go red as she thought about him. "But now there's no chance of that."

Dorothy patted Hattie on the arm. "I'm sure there will be other men, Hattie."

"I doubt it. There are no young men in Nowhere!" Hattie complained.

"You have a point, but you never know. You saw what happened with Carter and me!" Dorothy reminded her sister. Carter Reeves was an attorney who had moved to Nowhere for a summer to work on an important case. Dorothy had been hired to help him keep his books. Instead, they'd fallen in love. Even though Carter was an avowed city man, he had been so smitten by Dorothy that he'd ended up staying in Nowhere permanently.

Now, Dorothy and Carter happily lived on property in Nowhere with their young children. They occasionally visited Carter's relatives in the city, but they were very content with their lives in Nowhere.

Hattie nodded, but she wasn't sure. Dorothy had been lucky. What if Hattie wasn't so lucky? "I think the hardest part is seeing you and all of our other sisters who are happily married. I never thought much about having children, but after meeting Will, I realized that I wanted him to be the father of my children. Does that sound crazy?"

Dorothy squeezed Hattie's hand. "Oh, Hattie, that doesn't sound crazy to me at all. Matters of love are rarely simple. I wish I could help you more, but I don't know what to do."

"It's okay," Hattie told Dorothy. "Just allowing me to talk about it has been helpful—even though it's making me cry."

"Oh, Hattie, I'm sorry!" Dorothy threw her arms around her sister.

"I'm only teasing," Hattie said, but Dorothy could see the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"It will be okay, Hattie," Dorothy reassured. "I don't know exactly

how—but I promise you, it will all work out in the end.”

Hattie smiled through her tears. “Thank you, Dorothy. I’m lucky to have you.”

Dorothy bit her lip. She hated to see Hattie in such a sad situation. “You’re welcome, dear. If you ever need to talk, any time, I’m here for you.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’m going to lie down now.” Hattie hugged Dorothy goodbye and went into the house.

Dorothy stood for a while, deep in thought. Now that she lived outside the family home, it was rare that she had any disagreement or tension with her parents. But the look on Hattie’s face made her want to speak out.

Dorothy made up her mind and walked back into the house. She went to the formal parlor. “Can I speak with you, Cletus and Edna Petunia?”

Cletus looked up in surprise, pausing the game of checkers he was playing with Carter. “What is it, dear?”

“I just spoke to Hattie,” Dorothy began nervously.

CLETUS AND EDNA PETUNIA exchanged a look.

Dorothy cleared her throat. “I think you’ve made a big mistake.”

ACROSS TOWN, Will Hart folded his clothes and stuffed them into his leather travel bag. It had taken him longer than anticipated to pack his personal belongings, and now he had to go out to the stable to pack all of the equipment for the horses.

Will felt miserable as he dragged himself outside. He didn’t want to leave Bagley. He wished they’d had a few more weeks, just enough time for him to demonstrate to the Sanders that he was worthy of their daughter.

As Will began walking toward the stables, he saw a flash of lightning and heard a deafening thunderclap. Suddenly, it seemed that the skies had burst forth with buckets of freezing rain. Will stifled the urge to curse loudly. He had thought things couldn’t have been worse, but the rain proved him wrong.

Some of the horses jumped, spooked by the lightning and thunder. Others whined, unhappy at the water that poured in. Since the stop in Bagley was a temporary one, the rodeo was using a section of the pavilion as makeshift stables. This meant that the structure did not protect the horses from the elements.

Will sighed and tried to calm some of the more skittish horses. His long day was becoming longer and more difficult. As he worked, his

thoughts drifted to Hattie. He wondered what she was doing. No doubt she was in trouble from their moonlit escapades. He hoped she wasn't suffering too badly. He felt awful that he couldn't be there for her.

Soon, Will and the horses were soaking wet. He gathered the equipment into piles and prepared to load it into the wagons. He put his left arm over his eyes to shield them from the rain and stared up at the sky. The rain showed no signs of letting up.

Just then, he saw Robert running toward the tents. "What do you make of this?" Will called. "Do you think we'll still leave first thing in the morning?"

Robert shrugged, and Will saw that he was also drenched. "You'll need to talk with the boss about that." Robert continued on his way, holding his hands above his head in an attempt to block out the rain.

Will groaned. He wasn't sure what condition Mr. Ingalls would be in, and he was sure the weather would only worsen his mood. But he wanted to know if he really needed to load all the equipment into the wagons in this dreadful weather.

Will ventured out into the storm and went back to the tents. Rain dripped from his brow and ears as he waited outside Mr. Ingalls' tent. "Mr. Ingalls? Are you in there, sir? I have a question for you."

Will heard a crashing noise from inside the tent.

"Mr. Ingalls?" Will repeated.

A few moments later, the door to the tent opened and an arm poked out, beckoning him inside. When Will's eyes adjusted to the dimly lit tent, he saw an empty whiskey bottle sitting next to Mr. Ingalls' chair. He sighed and hoped his boss would be coherent enough to answer his question. "The storm's pretty bad out there," Will began. He shook his left arm and water sprayed everywhere, illustrating his point.

Mr. Ingalls shielded his face from the water and groaned.

"I'd like to know if you still plan on leaving town first thing in the morning. It's not looking like it's going to let up." Will took a deep breath. "Perhaps we could leave a little later, if conditions improve."

Mr. Ingalls looked at Will sternly. "Son, you need to do as I say."

"Yes, Mr. Ingalls," Will replied.

Mr. Ingalls paused for a long time. Will waited patiently. But instead of saying something, Mr. Ingalls simply burst out laughing.

Will was used to the rodeo owner's erratic behavior. "Mr. Ingalls, you haven't told me what to do yet," he pointed out.

Mr. Ingalls smirked. "You need to get out of here. Let's get out of here first thing in the morning."

Will sighed wearily. "Even with the storm coming through?"

Mr. Ingalls hiccupped loudly. "Even with the storm coming

through.”

“Yes, sir,” Will said politely. Inside, he was fuming, but Mr. Ingalls was his boss, and whatever he said ruled the rodeo. He had hired each and every performer in the Wild West show, and he could easily fire them if he felt like it. Will didn’t want to test his luck.

Will showed himself out of the tent, not bothering to wait for Mr. Ingalls to say another word. Packing up all of the equipment would take hours, and he’d surely be soaked to the bone once he was done. He’d probably even develop pneumonia. It would serve Mr. Ingalls right—but then again, Will wouldn’t be able to appreciate Mr. Ingalls’s comeuppance.

Will walked across the fairgrounds, heading back to the pavilion to finish packing. The rain was still pouring down. Will knew Mr. Ingalls had made a poor decision, but he didn’t see what choice he had in following the owner’s orders.

Will worked as quickly as he could as the cold rain pelted down on him. The horses were still unhappy and groaned with displeasure. “Trust me,” Will announced to the animals. “I don’t like this any better than you do.”

Will worked in a steady rhythm. He had packed the rodeo up countless times before and moved onto the next city. For some reason, though, leaving this time simply felt wrong.

Will rubbed his left hand across his eyes. He was getting tired, and the storm had not abetted. Just when it felt like the rain would never end, Robert ran up to Will.

“Have you heard?” Robert asked, out of breath.

“Heard what?” Will scowled. He did not care for interruptions while he worked.

“We need to put it all back!” Robert cried. “Damn Ingalls!”

“Excuse me?” Will was sure he’d misheard his friend.

“That’s right. Ingalls said we’re staying an extra night,” Robert shouted over the rain.

“Why would he—”

Robert shrugged. “I have no idea. He’s talking about some crazy rich man who wants us to stay in town. Said we’re going to do another show tomorrow night.”

“But we’ve already had our last show!” Will protested.

Robert held up his hands. “I’m just the messenger, Will. I’m repeating what I heard.”

“I didn’t mean to lash out at you,” Will apologized. “But I’ve been working through this crazy rain because Ingalls said we were heading out first thing tomorrow.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Boss says we need to get ready for another show. I need to tell the others.” Robert continued on, alerting

the other men and women to stop packing.

Will rubbed his temple with his left hand. His entire body ached from packing everything up. But he would do what he needed to do. Most of the equipment he had just packed would need to be unpacked, and he'd have to groom the horses to prepare them for tomorrow's show.

He also would need to coordinate with the other rodeo cowboys to make sure they knew the order they would be performing in. Normally, Will found his lifestyle adventurous and exciting. Living out of a tent, sleeping on the ground, and eating meals out of cans seemed exotic. He got to see places he would never have seen if he'd stayed in his hometown. But that night, Will wanted nothing more than to warm himself by a fire, eat a hot meal, and go to sleep in a nice, firm bed. Instead, he'd be rushing around for hours, preparing for a final show that had seemingly come out of nowhere.

Will tried to remember the last time Mr. Ingalls had demanded another show in a town they were preparing to leave. On some occasions, Mr. Ingalls would arrange less-than-upstanding deals with proprietors in small towns that Will and Robert had their misgivings about. But overall, despite his drinking, he was a good and understanding boss. When men or women needed to take a leave to visit family or take care of personal obligations, he gave them time off without questioning them or swindling them out of money. And sometimes, the extra shows he added through his deals gave him the ability to hire more workers, making everyone's load lighter.

As Will pondered this, he remembered that Mr. Ingalls still owed him four months' pay. Since Will didn't have a wife or family to support, he didn't mind when Mr. Ingalls wasn't prepared to pay him on time. He allowed Mr. Ingalls to distribute pay to the men with mouths to feed or ailing parents they needed to send money to. He knew Mr. Ingalls would eventually catch up.

But this time, it had been four months, and Mr. Ingalls had not said a word to him. Will decided he would remind Mr. Ingalls about the missing pay when he saw him later.

Will unpacked all of the equipment that he had just put into boxes and crates. His muscles were clamoring for rest, but there was still a lot to do. He hoped that whoever Mr. Ingalls had struck a deal with was worth all this extra fuss.

The morning sun was bright and warm against Hattie's face as she woke up. Her cheeks were salty from her tears the night before. As much as she tried to focus on a future that didn't include Will Hart, it made her distraught to think about.

Hattie pulled herself out of bed and dressed for the day. Edna Petunia had given her another lengthy list of chores to tackle, and there was no use putting it off. The work needed to be done whether she liked it or not.

Hattie filled a bucket with water and a little soap. She took a mop from the closet and soaked it in the sudsy water, then wiped the mop back and forth across the kitchen floor. As she worked, she did her best to put rodeos and cowboys out of her mind completely.

Since Theresa was at the mercantile, filling in for Hattie, Katie was responsible for watching Dorothy and Carter's children while they were out of town. As Hattie worked her way through her endless tasks, she would occasionally run into her nephews in the hallway. She smiled at them, and they hugged her, excited to see their Aunt Hattie.

Hattie worked steadily throughout the day. As dinner approached, Cletus came home from work early. "I have a surprise!" Cletus announced.

Hattie barely looked up in interest. She was sweeping the floor in the entryway. But Katie came bounding toward the front door with the boys. "What kind of surprise?"

Cletus winked, a strange grin spreading across his face. "It's a secret! Everyone, be dressed and ready to go by six o'clock. I stopped at the mercantile, and Theresa's going to be coming with Lewis and Ruby."

Hattie looked up. Despite her mood, she was intrigued. "Am I allowed to come, too?"

Cletus's eyes shined with compassion. "Of course, Hattie darling."

The rest of the work went quickly once Hattie had something to look forward to. She was so curious what Cletus was planning. Once her chores were finished, Hattie helped Katie dress the boys and get them ready for a trip by wagon. Edna Petunia said she didn't know

where they were going either, but Hattie had a feeling that she knew exactly where they were going.

It sounded like the entire Sanders family was coming, which was a rarity. The only place all the Sanders were ever together was at church—or, of course, a Sanders family wedding. But only Hattie, Theresa, and Katie were left—and none of them had any prospects of marriage any time soon.

As Hattie thought of marriage, it reminded her of Will's proposal. Tonight was probably his first night performing in another town. She wondered if they'd gone east or west and if the rodeo would ever return to Bagley. Hattie's mind drifted off as she buttoned one of her nephew's shirts.

"Hattie! What are you thinking of?" Katie giggled. "You seem lost in your thoughts!"

"I'm sorry," Hattie apologized. "I'm a bit distracted."

"Oh, Hattie. Is it that cowboy?" Katie whispered.

Hattie smiled and shrugged. "It's not going to happen. I need to get over it."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Katie squeezed her sister's hand.

Downstairs, Edna Petunia surveyed her brood. "You bastards clean up nicely."

"What's a bastard?" Dorothy and Carter's youngest son asked.

"That's a word you'll learn when you're older," Hattie quickly interjected.

Edna Petunia patted her grandson on the head. "All in time, little grandbastard."

Hattie smiled despite her sadness. Some things never changed. If she had run away with the rodeo, she wouldn't get to see Edna Petunia very often or hear the outrageous things she often said. She would have missed the old woman deeply.

Cletus loaded the family into the wagon and set off for his mysterious destination. On the way there, Katie and Hattie took turns guessing where he was taking them and who else would be there, but Cletus's lips were sealed.

Suddenly, Hattie recognized some farmland they were passing. "We're in Bagley!" Hattie said excitedly.

"Are we going to see Penny and Tom?" Katie guessed.

"I won't answer your question, but Penny and Tom will be there," Cletus said.

Hattie and Katie exchanged smiles. They were definitely going to Penny and Tom's ranch. Hattie was looking forward to seeing the McClains and their growing family, but she felt a twinge of disappointment. She didn't know where she had hoped they were going, but Penny and Tom's ranch seemed a little familiar and not as

exciting as a mysterious destination.

To Hattie's surprise, Cletus passed the road they normally took to get to the McClain property. Instead, he drove onward for a few more miles and parked the wagon outside of the fairgrounds. Hattie saw each one of her sisters and their families standing outside the entrance!

Hattie and Katie looked at Cletus in confusion.

"Surprise!" Edna Petunia shrieked with laughter as she saw Hattie and Katie's faces.

Still baffled, the girls climbed out of the wagon and helped their nephews climb out, too. Dorothy scooped up her boys. "Thank you for keeping them safe."

"Aren't you supposed to be visiting Carter's family?" Hattie asked.

Dorothy looked at Carter and shared a secret smile. "We had a slight change of plans."

Then, Hattie noticed something else that was very odd. The Wild West show sign had been taken down, and she had assumed that the group had moved on to the next town. But instead of being abandoned, the fairground was buzzing with activity. Hattie heard the *clop* of hooves against dirt, heard music playing, and heard laughter coming from the pavilion.

The place wasn't nearly as crowded as the last few times she had visited, but Hattie saw rows of wagons lined up at the entrance with the Wild West Show emblazoned on the carriages. *What is going on?* Hattie thought to herself.

Cletus and Edna Petunia each put a hand on Hattie's shoulders.

"Hattie, we owe you an apology," Cletus began. "We didn't mean to jump to conclusions about Will."

"We just didn't want to lose you. You're one of our fifteen favorite bastards!" Edna Petunia grinned.

Hattie nodded. "I understand."

"To try to make it up to you, I spoke with the man who runs this rodeo and convinced him to stay in town an extra night. The rodeo's going to do a private show just for our family," Cletus announced.

"This way, you can say goodbye to your cowboy!" Edna Petunia pointed out.

Hattie's eyes filled with tears again, but this time, they were happy, overwhelmed tears. "Thank you." She looked around at her entire family. She was so lucky to have each and every one of them.

"Well—what are you waiting for? Let's go!" Edna Petunia cried. She began running toward the pavilion along with several of her grandchildren. Hattie was continually amazed at how spry her adoptive mother was.

Inside the pavilion, Hattie's sisters excitedly chattered about the

Wild West show. Only she, Katie, and Theresa had seen it. She couldn't wait to hear what they thought.

The announcer came out. "Tonight, we're doing something a little different! As you can see, the seats have not been filled. That's because we have the honor of conducting a private show for a distinguished family of the nearby town of No-How!"

Edna Petunia stood up and hollered. "No-*where*!" Her shouts were drowned out by the stampede of hooves as the performers rushed onto the stage. A hush fell over the Sanders family as they watched the cowboys' speed and agility. Hattie felt a special rush in her stomach as Will lassoed a steer.

"Welcome to the Sanders family!" The announcer's voice thundered around the pavilion. The Sanders family whooped and hollered. Hattie laughed. It had been very fun to see the rodeo as part of a larger crowd, not once, but three times. Now she realized that seeing a private show for only her family members was even better.

It was no surprise that the entire family was captivated by Will Hart in particular. They were thrilled as he lassoed, shot, and danced on horseback. When he disappeared midway throughout the show, one of Hattie's brothers-in-law actually shouted for his swift return.

Backstage, Will raced toward Mr. Ingalls.

"Sir, I have a proposition for you," Will said seriously.

Mr. Ingalls looked distracted. "I need to go out to announce the next act."

"Just a minute, sir. Please." Mr. Ingalls knew Will never asked for something unless it was important. He nodded.

A few minutes later, confusion settled in over the Sanders family.

"Is this part of the show?" Pastor Micah Barton, married to Hattie's sister Sarah Jane, asked.

"I'm not sure," Sarah Jane replied.

"I want that cowboy with one arm to come back!" Jed yelled.

"Sh!" Gertrude, Jed's librarian wife, smiled.

To everyone's surprise, Jed's wish was promptly fulfilled. Will Hart raced to center stage. "I apologize for the interruption," Will began in a loud voice that carried throughout the pavilion. He easily dismounted his horse.

Hattie felt a flutter of nerves in her stomach, but she wasn't sure why. This trick had not been a part of the previous shows he'd seen. Was it new?

"You see, I love being a part of the rodeo. I've loved horses my entire life. It was my dream to work with them when I was old enough. Just as I became a man, I was in a bad accident. I lost something that night . . . but what was it?" Will paused to scratch his head with his left arm, and the Sanders family laughed and cheered. It

was strange, but they were eating up every one of Will's words.

"In all seriousness," Will continued. "That was one of the most devastating nights of my life. I was sure there was no way I would get to realize my dream of working with the animals I love. But each day, I would practice getting onto a horse. It was hard at first—it was awful, actually—but every time, I got a little bit better. Soon I could climb on and off horses. I had always been good at stunts, and I saw a Wild West show. I made it my goal to be part of the rodeo."

"I liked it better when he was doing the stunts," Edna Petunia whispered to Cletus.

"I think the man may be building to something," Cletus said. He glanced at Hattie, who was hanging onto each word.

Edna Petunia shrugged and took a sip from her flask.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why I'm talking about this now. And maybe wondering why I don't just get back on my horse—" Will said.

"Hear, hear!" Edna Petunia whispered loudly.

Will continued. "The thing is, I *do* love being a part of the rodeo. But unfortunately, tonight is my last show."

A hush fell over the family. Backstage, performers began to talk and argue. No one could believe what they were hearing.

"In the last few days, I've realized there's a dream that I have that's more important than anything. It's even more important than my old dream." Will paused, looked up at the Sanders family, and looked straight at Hattie. "I've found a woman I want to marry, and as of tonight, I'm retiring from the rodeo. Hattie Sanders, I love you more than anything. You are what makes my life worth living. I know that I still have to prove to your family that I am worth your love, but I know I can do it. Hattie Sanders, will you marry me?"

Hattie's heart began to leap inside her chest. She felt all her family's heads swivel and look at her. She couldn't believe what was happening, and she felt like she was moving as slow as molasses.

Hattie looked at Edna Petunia and Cletus.

Cletus smiled. "My concern was that my daughter would run off with a rodeo cowboy. If he's leaving the rodeo, that means he'll be able to provide a decent home for you. No objections."

Edna Petunia winked. "No objections here. I'm thrilled when my bastards marry!"

"Go on down there!" Jed hollered. Gertrude shook her head, but she was smiling.

Hattie made her way to the front row of the pavilion, and Will rushed to meet her. He helped her step onto the stage, and the Sanders family began to applaud.

Will repeated his question. "Hattie, will you marry me?"

“Yes!” Hattie cried happily. She was in shock. The crowd erupted into cheers and whistles.

“Kiss her!” someone yelled. Hattie figured it was probably Jed.

Will obliged, using his left arm to encircle Hattie’s waist and dip her backwards. He kissed her so long and so hard that by the time he came up for air, Hattie’s knees were shaking and her head was spinning. She couldn’t believe that this was what she would be able to do for the rest of her life.

That gave Hattie an idea. She paused and turned around, looking at the crowd. Hattie whispered her plan into Will’s ear. She hesitated, wondering if she’d just suggested something foolish that he wouldn’t care for.

Will’s face broke out into a huge smile. “That’s an incredible idea!” He grabbed her with his arm and scooped her up off her feet. Hattie giggled.

Will turned back to the audience. “We have one final act for you tonight. Hattie’s going to assist me. I need someone named Micah Barton to come down here, too.”

Micah looked at his wife, terrified. “Are they going to ask me to lasso? I’m not very good at that.”

Sarah Jane patted Micah on the back. “I’m sure they’ll only make you help with what you’re comfortable with, dear. I think you should follow Will’s instructions.”

Micah nodded grimly and followed the same path Hattie had taken to get to the stage. Once he was there, Will went to meet him and discussed some matters quietly while Hattie rushed backstage.

As soon as Hattie was off stage, she saw a familiar and friendly face—Jessie. “Will said you might be able to help me.” She quickly explained the plan.

Jessie’s eyes lit up. “I have just the thing!”

Twenty minutes later, the Sanders family, especially the grandchildren, were getting restless. “How long is this going to take?” Carter whispered.

Edna Petunia pulled peppermint sticks out of her bosom. “Anyone want some peppermint candy?”

One of Penny’s sons reached out for it, but Penny took his hand and gently guided it back. “Not now, sweetheart.”

Edna Petunia shrugged and took one for herself, stuffing the rest of them back into her chest. “They’re delicious!”

Finally, Micah Barton took center stage. He looked stunned. “Today, I will join Will Hart and Hattie Sanders in matrimony.”

Whistles, applause, and laughter filled the pavilion. Hattie could hear it from backstage, where she waited with Jessie. She slowly walked out, and the crowd was shocked into silence.

Hattie had been transformed. She wore a white, full hoop skirt along with a fringed white jacket. Flowers had been woven through her hair, and someone had even dusted her cheeks with a bit of rouge. She looked practically unrecognizable from the sweet, simple girl who had arrived at the rodeo.

Will clasped his chest as he saw his bride-to-be. She was truly breathtaking. Hattie approached Will and Micah, holding a small bunch of flowers Jessie had picked for her. She couldn't believe how quickly the older woman had worked.

Micah smiled as Hattie walked up to the men. He began to recite the vows of matrimony, and soon, there wasn't a dry eye in the pavilion.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," Micah declared to thunderous applause.

Afterward, everyone enjoyed a white almond cake at a long picnic table outside the fairgrounds. Despite the thunderstorm the day before, the weather was perfect for an outdoor picnic. It reminded Hattie of the night Will had come to the Sanders' house.

"Where did the cake come from?" Hattie asked in amazement.

Dorothy smiled. "After we saw how taken you were with Will, Carter and I decided there was no way we could go to visit his relatives with you feeling so bad. We talked to Edna Petunia and Cletus, and they had the idea for this private rodeo show."

Carter continued, "When Cletus suggested inviting the entire family, Dorothy and I spent the day going around to each of your sisters and their families. When we stopped to see Hope, she and Dorothy baked this cake together because we thought we'd be hungry after the show!"

"We had no idea it would be a wedding cake!" Dorothy laughed.

"That was quite the surprise," Cletus admitted.

Will smiled ruefully. "I saw an opportunity, and I took it."

"And I'm very glad you did!" Hattie put in.

She stared around at her family. Everyone was talking, laughing, and joking with Will, as if he'd been part of the family for years, not minutes. She knew that everything had worked out exactly the way it was supposed to. She had Will, she had her family, and she had Nowhere—what else could she possibly want?

Epilogue

Seven Months Later

Hattie carried a casserole to the picnic tables outside of the Nowhere church. The family was having a luncheon to celebrate one of the newest grandchildren.

“Ouch!” Hattie cried, nearly dropping the dish. Theresa rushed up to her and took the casserole from her.

“Are you okay, Hattie?” Theresa asked anxiously.

Hattie rubbed her swollen belly. “Thank you, Theresa. This baby sometimes seems like he or she is going to kick right out of my stomach!”

Hattie searched around for her husband. They had been so thrilled when Will had been able to use the money he’d earned in the rodeo to buy a parcel of land in Nowhere. She spotted him talking to Jed. Will and Jed had become fast friends. Now that Hattie and Will were expecting their first child, she knew that Jed and Gertrude would be very helpful to them. “Will!” Hattie called.

Will rushed up to his wife. He noticed how pale she looked and took her arm. “Are you all right?”

Hattie nodded. “I’ll be fine. But this baby is definitely your child. I think he or she is doing flips right now!”

Will chuckled and rubbed Hattie’s stomach. “Start ’em young, that’s what I like to say.”

Hattie pretended to make a face. “We’ll just have to see about that!”

Will smiled and kissed her cheek, and Hattie felt a sense of calm spread over her. No matter how much pain this baby might bring her, she knew the child would also bring her joy and an everlasting connection to the man she loved.

As she looked out across the beautiful Nowhere day, Hattie sighed. Everything was just as it should be.

About the Author

www.kirstenosbourne.com



Also by Kirsten Osbourne

If you enjoyed this book and would like to receive emails when Kirsten has new books out, please text 'Bob' to 42828.

For a complete list of Kirsten's works head to her website
www.kirstenosbourne.com